Stop wearing deodorant *Philip Hensher* / **We're not ready for biological war** *James Phillips*

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Simply red

Andy Burnham's centrist act isn't fooling anyone, says *Tim Shipman*

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Labour's inheritance

Nothing so became Keir Starmer's premiership as his leaving of it. Farewell remarks outside Downing Street, unpunctuated by the odious Steve Bray; a brief goodbye in Buckingham Palace, before the King welcomed his fourth new prime minister in four years; then to the pub to drown his sorrows with Rachel Reeves, leaving Andy Burnham and John Healey to pick up the national tab.

There is an irony to Healey's appointment as Chancellor. Burnham blames Margaret Thatcher for so many of the country's ills but her time in office was devoted to clearing up the dreadful inheritance left by the last Healey at the Treasury: a top rate of income tax at 98 per cent, untamed inflation, union disarray, socialist sclerosis.

Rather than take a wrong turn in the 1980s, Britain flourished. A million council tenants became homeowners, one in four adults became shareholders, GDP was up a third and we had the fastest growth in manufacturing productivity in the G7. In hoping to reverse '40 years of neoliberalism', Burnham is on an ideological crusade to kick out the props of prosperity.

If Britain's economy took a wrong turn, it was not while Thatcher was prime minister, but in the years following the 2008 financial crisis. As Chris Curtis, the MP who formerly chaired the Labour Growth Group, has highlighted, between 2008 and 2025 GDP per capita grew by just 8.7 per cent; in the 17 preceding, post-Thatcher, years, it had grown by 43 per cent.

Successive governments have struggled as an ageing and sickening population, the Covid pandemic and a reluctance to cut spending have forced up taxes and borrowing. In fiscal terms, we have long since reversed the boom of the 1980s. The tax burden is now at its highest level since the 1940s; public spending as a share of GDP is at its highest level since the 1950s; public sector debt stands at 95 per cent of GDP, the highest level since the 1960s. We are spending £109 billion a year on debt interest alone, far more than on defence.

Starmer and Reeves did their best to make this situation worse. From national insurance hikes and public sector pay rises, to reversing the two-child benefit cap, their brief time in office left Britain stagnant and spendthrift. Yet Burnham's plans appear to be a doubling down on that approach.

A swirl of spending pledges accompanied Burnham's entry into No. 10. The Prime Minister wants the largest council house-building programme in a generation, the creation of an NHS-style system for social care and an end to rough sleeping – all ideas lifted from Jeremy Corbyn's 2019 manifesto.

Starmer and Reeves did their best to make the situation worse. Burnham's plans appear to be a doubling down

Also mooted is a possible increase to the tax-free personal allowance, which would place the burden of paying for our bloated state on a smaller number of taxpayers; the removal of VAT from energy bills, supposedly covered by scrapping the Digital ID programme (which we now learn was unfunded); placing Thames Water into special administration, at a cost of £2 billion; and boosting defence spending. This last point is especially contentious. Healey resigned from Starmer's cabinet over the former PM's refusal to fund the Defence Investment Plan. Now Healey must hit his own target of spending 3 per cent of GDP on defence by 2030.

Already, reports suggest some of these pledges are being rowed back on due to lack of money. But there is no doubt that Burnham wants Healey to spend more. The new Chancellor must balance this with sticking to Labour's 2024 manifesto pledge not to raise income tax, national insurance or VAT, as well as Burnham's promise to stick to Reeves's fiscal rules. A failure to do so might trigger a reaction from the bond markets.

Either Healey fails to deliver on Burnham's promises, or taxes will have to rise. The former would disappoint all who hoped the new Prime Minister would bring change; the latter would represent a breach of trust between Labour and an electorate already surprised by Burnham's rapid rise to No. 10.

Trapped between this Scylla and Charybdis, Burnham has an option not open to Odysseus: calling an election. But since his personal ratings are already falling, the more likely outcome seems a drift towards defeat, as he fails to reckon with the country's structural problems. Burnham promises a ten-year plan: suitably Soviet, but with no suggestion of how to raise our anaemic growth rate, only to tax and spend more. Long gone are liberalisations of planning rules and other supply-side measures that MPs like Curtis once hoped for.

For Healey to rise to the Treasury challenge, he must break from Burnham's instincts in two ways: by looking south and towards the 1980s. Roger Douglas, the New Zealand Labour party finance minister in that decade, presided over a series of liberalisations, by slashing subsidies, deregulating finance and simplifying tax. This upset party orthodoxy but reversed his country's torpor and ensured his government's re-election. A similar boldness here is Labour's best hope.

Burnham's premiership has so far repeated the worst sins of Starmer's: grand promises of change from a cast of politicians who have been around Westminster for decades, and vague plans which unravel on contact with fiscal reality. If he wants to restore trust, Burnham must challenge tax-and-spend orthodoxy, revive growth and liberate the economy – just as one of his predecessors did, in the 1980s.

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It's the best sex-with-a-vacuum-cleaner film I've seen in a while — perhaps ever.
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Admittedly I didn't have my Sunday-best shoes on, but I didn't fancy the rather snooty scrutiny the doorman subjected me to.
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CONTRIBUTORS

George Osborne writes this week's Diary on p7. He is chair of the British Museum, where the Bayeux Tapestry is on display from September until July next year.

James Dixon says that smoking is vital to thought on p18. He is a Glasgow-based novelist, poet and playwright.

Peter Hitchens casts doubt on the American narrative about the Nord Stream pipeline explosion on p22. He is a columnist for the *Mail on Sunday*.

James Phillips reviews Annie Jacobsen's new book on biological war on p34. He is a former special adviser to the Prime Minister on science and technology.

Lindsay Johns reviews the new Colson Whitehead novel on p38. He is a writer and broadcaster, who makes documentaries for BBC Radio 3 and 4.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK

Home

The King accepted Sir Keir Starmer's resignation as Prime Minister and asked Andy Burnham to form an administration. In Downing Street, he made a short speech without notes, saying that his first instruction would be to end rough sleeping. He invited President Donald Trump to Manchester. He also spoke to President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine and President Emmanuel Macron of France. He promised a 'cost of living government', and removed VAT from domestic energy bills for six months from October, giving an average saving of 86p a week. Bus fares in England would be capped at £2 from 2027.

Mr Burnham appointed a cabinet of 12 women and 11 men, gunning for Starmer loyalists. John Healey, who resigned as defence secretary last month in protest at insufficient funding, was made Chancellor of the Exchequer in place of Rachel Reeves. Wes Streeting became Defence Secretary. Miatta Fahnbulleh was made Energy Secretary in place of Ed Miliband, who became Foreign Secretary in place of Yvette Cooper, who was made Health Secretary. Shabana Mahmood stayed as Home Secretary. Louise Haigh was made Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in place of Darren Jones. Angela Rayner was made Housing Secretary again. Lucy Powell was made Education Secretary. Dame Angela Eagle was made Environment Secretary. Alex Norris became Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary in place of David Lammy. Ellie Reeves was made Attorney General in place of Lord Hermer. Jonathan Reynolds became Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade after the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology was abolished. Anas Sarwar resigned as Scottish Labour leader to be made a peer and be appointed a minister in the Burnham administration. Mr Burnham swore allegiance to Everton FC. The former Liverpool player and England captain Kevin Keegan died aged 75.

China's Jingye Group demanded compensation after British Steel was fully nationalised. Inflation fell from 2.8 to 2.6 per cent. Among 26 new peers were Sir Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, and Sir Brian Leveson, the former chairman of the inquiry into the press. Joshua Kerry, 28, from Rotherham, was charged with the murder of Ann Widdecombe; Westminster magistrates' court heard that she died after being hit on the head with a hammer 21 times. Edward Stourton, who presented *Today* for ten years, died aged 68. Josh Kerr beat the 1999 record for the mile with a time of three minutes 42.66 seconds.

Abroad

The United States attacked Iran 11 nights in a row. Iran attacked Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Two American soldiers were killed at a base in Jordan and another in Iraq. Since February the war in Iran had cost America $37.5 billion, Pete Hegseth, the Defence Secretary, told Congress. Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis announced a 'maritime embargo' against Saudi Arabia by closing the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea's southern gateway. Pirates hijacked a tanker off Yemen. A lettuce from Taylor Farms was declared to contain the cyclosporiasis parasite that caused explosive diarrhoea affecting thousands in the United States; but next day the test was found to be a false positive. Spain won the World Cup in a final that saw an Argentine player sent off.

Many Ukrainians protested against President Zelensky's decision not to re-appoint defence minister, Mykhailo Fedorov. After a few days Mr Zelensky sacked Mr Fedorov's antagonist, the commander-in-chief, Oleksandr Syrskyi. Ukrainian drones struck two warehouses belonging to Russia's biggest online retailer, Wildberries. Russia launched the biggest missile attack on Kyiv of the war and hit a cargo ship off Odesa, killing ten. The Russian frigate *Neustrashimy* carried out a live-fire artillery exercise 40 miles off Plymouth. Daniel Ortega, President of Nicaragua since 2007, said that to prevent the opposition from coming to power, the country would hold no further elections.

Hundreds of wildfires in Ontario sent smoke over Washington, New York and Boston. President Trump complained that the US was being 'invaded by filthy, polluted, and unhealthy air'. More than 100 houses were destroyed by a wildfire in Drammen, 30 miles from Oslo. The online 'influencer' Andrew Tate and his brother Tristan were arrested in the US as the Crown Prosecution Service in Britain brought 38 new charges against them and sought their extradition. Sir Garfield Sobers, the great West Indies all-rounder, died aged 89. CSH

DIARY

George Osborne

A couple of years ago we rented a villa in Ithaca. ‘Who wants to go see Odysseus’s palace?’ I said to everyone sitting by the pool. So I went alone. High on a hill overlooking the sea, among the pines, I found the remnants of a citadel. Last Friday evening I was transported back there by Christopher Nolan’s epic. Settling a few feet in front of the huge West End screen – the last seats available – my neighbour did what no one does in a cinema and introduced himself. He was a Labour minister, one of their brightest young stars, looking a little distracted. Watching a tale of betrayal and meandering missions: he was just preparing for the week ahead.

If Britain had been fighting the Trojan war we’d be on our seventh Agamemnon by now. Each recent one arrives in Downing Street promising a break with the past. ‘Westminster isn’t working,’ these fly-by-night premiers intone. ‘The elites have failed you for 40 years.’ I don’t understand why they all choose to trash the very profession they practise – or the machineries of Whitehall and parliament, which are the only tools available to them. If you tell people that politics itself is broken, no wonder they don’t look to career politicians for the solution. Perhaps acknowledging the successes of politics past would be a better place for these mainstream parties to start: the rescue from industrial bankruptcy under Thatcher and Major; the improvements in healthcare under Blair and Brown; the full employment, regional devolution and rise in education standards under Cameron. After all, it was only ten years ago that we were the darling of the bond market, had an economy outpacing the US, northern cities on the rise and international wealth flocking to our capital rather than fleeing it. We could just start by trying to get back to the home we left.

John is the second Chancellor Healey I’ve met. The first, Denis, was in his nineties when I came up to him and announced myself as the new shadow chancellor. He paused, looked this cocky thirtysomething up and down and said: ‘I think I was shadow chancellor

once.’ It was Denis who indirectly gave me the idea for the Office for Budget Responsibility. He’d given a lecture at the LSE about his time in the Treasury in the 1970s, saying that his authority had been shredded because his economic forecasts were so wrong. Alistair Darling faced the same problem. My solution: don’t make them my forecasts, but instead create an independent body to remove the suspicion they’ve been fiddled. Most of the seven chancellors since me have railed against the OBR for spelling out the truth. When the bond markets won’t let you borrow more, and you want to cut taxes, then you need to find the political will to cut government spending. Likewise, if you want to increase spending then you need to raise taxes. If John wants to fund his own defence plan in full, then get ready for either some welfare cuts or some tax rises. It should be the former; my guess is it will be the latter. Then we’ll discover why almost 20 per cent of all Labour chancellors have been called Healey – because, like Labour governments who run against market economics, there haven’t been that many of them.

It’s good to see Kanishka Narayan take a seat at the cabinet table as the minister for AI. In my job, I see how it’s only countries which drive the adoption of this new technology from a strong centre that are succeeding. Kanishka is very impressive, a former civil servant and Stanford graduate who knows Silicon Valley. He also went to Eton, on a scholarship. He’s joined round that table by Hamish Falconer, who went to Nick Clegg’s old school, Westminster. Chuck in an Old Pauline and the omens would be positive.

There’s a famous ill-omen in the Bayeux Tapestry, a comet blazing above Harold’s England. As British Museum chair, I went to see the masterpiece unpacked and laid out. The combination of sweep and detail is breathtaking. I was with the once and future culture secretary Lisa Nandy, and we couldn’t resist a giggle together at the timing as we unveiled this tale of kings in the north and regicide. I think William the Conqueror would have admired Andy Burnham’s ruthless seizure of the crown. Burnham didn’t even have to fight a battle. And perhaps he will prove us wrong and deliver the circuit breaker William undoubtedly did. I hope to see the new Prime Minister with the King and the French President, when we unveil this blockbuster in early September.

George Osborne co-hosts the Political Currency *podcast.*

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Where does the opposition go?

Kemi Badenoch was in an upbeat mood when she addressed her troops last week. 'This time last year,' she said to the 1922 Committee, 'people told me Jenrick was taking over the party, Starmer was steady, Farage would be the next prime minister. A year later, Rob is under police investigation, Starmer has resigned and Farage is not even an MP.' It was a reminder of how quickly the wheel of politics can turn.

Now the arrival of Andy Burnham has reset Westminster. The cabinet has been reorientated towards Birmingham and the north. Members of the Co-Operative party – the standard-bearers of Labour's collectivist tradition – have been given the business, energy and education briefs. Mutualism, more than Manchesterism, could define the new government. In his first speech at No. 10, Burnham spoke of 'wrong turns' in the 1980s, stressing 'public control' and 'common purpose'. His opponents and their teams were listening intently. Nigel Farage digested the speech in the back of a car en route to Clacton; Badenoch was with family, planning her remarks at the Farnborough Airshow. Ed Davey, in true Lib Dem fashion, was stuck at a local NHS meeting, before catching up with the speech later. Yet as they assess how best to respond, there is now a risk that each party retreats into its comfort zone.

The Tories' initial reaction has been to leap to defend Margaret Thatcher's record. Many hope that Burnham-era politics will be fought over traditional left vs. right economic arguments. However, there is a risk for the Conservatives that the world has moved on. Much of Burnham's economic prescription is superficially attractive: muscular interventionism, duffing up water companies and refinancing the public realm. All this plays well with the electorate. There are few votes to be won in defending a crumbling *ancien régime*.

Like Spinal Tap, Reform has turned the volume up to 11, decrying the transfer of power as a 'coup – plain and simple'. They are spending much of the next month stumping across Britain and railing against the 'uniparty'. Enraged by criticisms from establishment media, they are building up their own platforms so they can speak to voters unfiltered. The risk, though, is that they spend much of the summer effectively talking to themselves, rerunning old tricks rather than converting other parties' voters.

The Lib Dems, meanwhile, have opted for inertia, quietly voting with Labour peers to kill moves in the Lords to debate Burnham's plans. Historically, when Labour does well, the Lib Dems do too. But increasingly some within Davey's ranks feel uncomfortable at effectively subcontracting out their futures to another party – especially when Lib Dem voters in affluent seats face higher tax bills.

Keir Starmer believed that Britain did not require a 1945 or 1979 'reset' moment: his successor clearly disagrees. Usually, a prime minister designs a plan for office and then seeks a public mandate for it. Burnham, though, is doing the opposite: seizing power, embarking on a 'listening tour' and then setting out his basis for government.

Fiscal constraints on Burnham's ambitions have raised expectations there will be an election within a year

Each of the other parties will spend the coming weeks planning how best to scrutinise Burnham's agenda in a way that acknowledges the validity of some of his critiques. Now parliament is in recess, the big battle will be over media airtime as the PM's allies and opponents try to define him.

Labour's rivals are preparing for a fight with John Healey, the new Chancellor, over the cost of living. The Tory charge is that the Prime Minister is writing cheques that the Chancellor cannot cash. Burnham's plans to cut VAT on energy bills and raise the personal tax threshold are already forcing the Treasury to mop up after him. It's a dynamic that will strain very quickly.

Reform has gone straight in on trying to define Healey for his work as a junior minister under Gordon Brown, depicting him as another failed politician of the old order. 'We thought [the chancellor] was going to be Shabana,' admits one Reformer. 'We had stuff drawn up.' There was delight, however, at Miatta Fahnbulleh taking over from Ed Miliband as a fellow green-minded energy secretary. Indeed, in an interview with Times Radio, she suggested her predecessor was not 'dogmatic' about net zero. 'The more we talk about net zero, the better for us,' says one gleeful Reformer.

'How many prime ministers have I missed?'

The fiscal constraints on Burnham's ambitions have raised expectations among his opponents that there will be an election within a year. Badenoch discussed this at the last shadow cabinet meeting before recess. Staff at CCHQ were instructed to start planning an election timetable. The manifesto will be shorter than usual. Badenoch is keen to focus on a few big priorities rather than an all-inclusive 'Christmas tree' approach.

Tory candidates are being selected earlier than many envisaged, in part to boost organising efforts in areas of the country where party resources are stretched. 'We're now adding more people to WhatsApp groups rather than removing them,' jokes one hopeful. At least one former cabinet minister is believed to have failed the new selection process. But, given the dire state of the party's polling, few Tories want Burnham to go for an early election. Some would prefer he instead resolves some of the country's problems that are driving voters to Reform. 'I need Labour to do well,' admits one MP.

Within Reform, the party is convinced that there will be an election by May 2027. This is a mix of hope as much as expectation. Farage's Norfolk speech on Tuesday sketched out the contours of the coming campaign: cost of living, immigration and crime. Candidates will be selected for seats from next week, following scores of interviews since May. The policy team has been keeping a register of their own commitments and a manifesto meeting was held on Wednesday morning. The challenge will be to keep various plates spinning as the party refocuses on Burnham.

The new Prime Minister's recent run of luck has been remarkable: selected, elected and crowned within eight weeks. But with political fortunes always changing, both Burnham and his opponents will need to be at the top of their game to avoid being caught in their comfort zones over the coming months.

THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

Andy Burnham is right. The cost of living is foremost in people's minds just now. Naturally his electricity bill VAT holiday and freeze of bus fares find agreement in television news vox pops and focus groups. But he offers no explanation for the causes and concentrates only on the symptoms. Obviously, the removal of the 5 per cent VAT will be nice for consumers. But underlying inflation today relates to government debauchery of money and disruptions of supply caused by Trump's tariffs and his short war, by Putin's long war and Ed Miliband's net-zero trap, which makes us pay expensive green levies and bans new domestic fossil fuel production. The remedy does not lie in the 1970s-style pretence that things can be made cheaper by fiat.

Is it just because I am a soft southerner, or am I am right to be shocked that the Burnham cabinet contains (so far as one knows) 33.333 per cent fewer gay men than the Starmer one? Out go Steve Reed from south London, to whom Lord Alli gave a pair of wellington boots worth more than £400 to help him be Defra secretary, and Peter Kyle from Brighton, friend of Peter Mandelson. The only pink cabinet survivor in this red regime is Wes Streeting (east London). He has been sent to the Ministry of Defence, perhaps on the northern, borderline 'homophobic' assumption that a sergeant-major can make a man of him. Possibly on a similar principle, Sir Chris Bryant has been promoted to Northern Ireland.

For the ceremony of prime-ministerial departure and arrival, amplified music in Whitehall, such as that which drowned out Sir Keir's original resignation statement, was banned. It was justified: free speech is endangered if you cannot hear anyone speak. But why a ban only to help here-today, gone-tomorrow PMs? Daily megaphone propaganda blares across Whitehall and Parliament Square, torturing local workers and legislators. Why not a blanket ban?

Once the killer of poor Ann Widdecombe has finally been brought to justice, it will be worth

reviewing the behaviour of the officer originally in charge, Matt Longman, assistant chief constable of Devon and Cornwall. Mr Longman gave the first press conference after the murder. Despite asking people not to speculate, he said emphatically that 'The incident is not being treated as terrorism'; there was 'no information to believe it is a politically motivated crime'. Three days later, the head of counter-terrorism policing said the killing had been 'a targeted attack', implying Mr Longman had rushed to judgment. Some of us have come across Mr Longman before. As the National Police Chiefs Council 'lead on foxhunting crime', he has often asserted guilt without proof. In 2023, he spoke on a platform of the League Against Cruel Sports calling for a new law to ban trail hunting: 'The Hunting Act is not working effectively and illegal hunting is still common practice. I know it, you know it, the public and the hunts know it.' In 2024, when the British Hound Sports Association invited Mr Longman to witness their trail-hunting education open day, he indignantly refused: 'This is hunt activity and very clearly designed to be good PR for hunting… I do not believe this to be an appropriate space for me to be in.' The candidate dressed as a fox who stood beside Andy Burnham at the Makerfield by-election count used a video clip of Mr Longman's thoughts to advance his campaign for a trail-hunting ban. I do wonder whether policing is an appropriate space for Mr Longman to be in.

Two weeks ago, I mentioned here that Edward Stourton, the distinguished broadcaster, had read out the speech of his cousin James at his 70th birthday party, James being too weak from cancer treatment to speak himself. What I felt unable to write at the time was that Edward himself was fatally ill. Last Saturday, Edward died. He had declaimed that birthday speech with the easy professionalism and natural warmth characteristic of his radio performances. If you knew his situation, as many at the dinner did, you felt its poignancy, but if you did not, you would have noticed nothing untoward. Comment after Edward's death has focused on his removal from the BBC *Today* programme on the unspoken grounds that he was too posh. Yet Edward, a friend of almost exactly 50 years, was just what a BBC reporter and presenter should be – and once was – impartial, courteous, clear, well-informed and authoritative without showing off. Privately, he held most of the usual BBC soft-left views (I remember genial disagreements about the EU, for example) but he never paraded them in public. A seeker after truth; he loved real news. A real loss.

My wife the churchwarden invites distinguished persons to come and speak in aid of our 14th-century parish church. Last Saturday, we listened to Bijan Omrani, whose new book, *God is an Englishman*, is taking enlightened parts of this country by storm. Himself a churchwarden, he sets out how the English Church, its King James Bible and Book of Common Prayer expressed and advanced the Christian culture on which our law, governance, language and literature depend. His eloquent words confirmed an idea recently fermenting in my head: how about a new British organisation with global reach – possibly incorporating or superseding the British Council? It would be entitled, in a nod to the rule of *Desert Island Discs*, 'The Bible and Shakespeare'. Its sole duty would be to foster interest in those two works in their 17th-century English forms. The founding purpose of the British Council in the 1930s was to counter the anti-British propaganda of the Axis. We face our Axis equivalents today. Why not deploy the greatest soft power England ever possessed?

Simply red

Andy Burnham's centrist act isn't fooling anyone

TIM SHIPMAN

When Ed Miliband and Shabana Mahmood arrived in Downing Street on Monday afternoon, the image of political rivals arm in arm symbolised a new government of differing views taking shape. It might have been more awkward. As they neared the door of No. 10 and the waiting television cameras, Miliband turned to Mahmood and asked: 'Should we turn around for a photo together?' Mahmood gave the idea short shrift: 'We're not getting married, Ed!'

But in a sense Labour is seeking a new relationship with the British public and everyone around Andy Burnham is alive to the importance of images, symbols and vibes. As Wes Streeting, the new Defence Secretary, put it in cabinet on Tuesday: 'We have a second chance to make a first impression with the voters.' It was a line Burnham liked so much he repeated it and No. 10 briefed it to journalists as his own.

Yet after less than a week as Britain's 59th premier, Burnham is already sending mixed messages to his audience as his vision for the country runs into the reality of the state of the public finances. 'We need to be a cost-of-living government,' the PM told his first cabinet meeting. 'Life's hard out there, isn't it, at the moment?' But having appointed John Healey, rather than Mahmood or Miliband, as Chancellor, he added: 'We've got to show fiscal discipline. We've got to show that our commitment to the fiscal rules is real. Boldly Labour, but prudently Labour as well at the same time. That's the thing we've got to pull off.'

Easier said than done. Burnham has already announced £340 million to tackle rough sleeping, another £850 million to remove VAT from domestic electricity bills and £450 million to cap bus fares at £2 nationwide. The appointment of Healey, who resigned as defence secretary because Starmer refused to back spending 3 per cent of GDP on defence by 2030, implies a commitment to send more money to the MoD – and Burnham has also indicated a desire to raise foreign aid spending back to 0.7 per cent of GDP. A prominent figure on the Labour right observes: '0.7 per cent on aid, 3 per cent on defence, not touching the triple lock… energy bills capped, transport fares capped. You get to £50 billion very quickly. And 1p on the basic rate of income tax raises you five to eight billion on a good day, under favourable circumstances, if you squeeze your eyes one way and keep your fingers crossed the other.'

These are eye-watering sums of money, which imply very significant tax rises in the autumn Budget. However you cut it, this is on course to be the most economically left-wing government since the 1970s.

But the details are vague, not least because plans Burnham and his team have openly considered already seem to have run into the buffers. On Tuesday, the Prime Minister's official spokesman talked down the prospect, floated just days before, that Labour might raise the income tax personal allowance above £12,570. There was also no clarity over whether the Chagos Islands deal has or has not been ditched or if plans to reopen oil and gas extraction in the North Sea will go ahead.

Burnham was 'within inches' of picking Mahmood as chancellor, but decided Healey was the safer bet

Burnham says the VAT cuts will be paid for by ditching Starmer's plans for digital ID, a scheme for which the funds had not yet been found – prompting a pointed intervention from Darren Jones, a cabinet minister Burnham had sacked. Some also see the policy as a hostage to fortune, since the VAT cut is only worth £1 a week and bills will probably rise by more than that anyway. 'It will be lost to the market and potentially unnoticed by voters,' says a Labour strategist. 'It's an ongoing cost that means every chancellor will now have either to find the money for it or be the one who raises taxes on fuel.'

In the Treasury there is nervousness. 'Officials don't mind where the money goes as long as you've got money coming in,' says a Whitehall veteran. 'If you want to put taxes up, fine. If you want to cut spending, fine. What they are anxious about is the level of borrowing and debt. And they are very anxious about it.'

Insiders say Burnham was 'within inches' of picking Mahmood as chancellor, but decided on Sunday that Healey was the safer bet. This was seen initially as a fudge, refusing to back either Miliband, the standard bearer of the soft left, or Mahmood, the Queen of Blue Labour. In fact, the decision is best understood as Burnham asserting personal control of economic policy. 'He came close on Shabana, but she is a great big strong, independent-minded political beast,' says one strategist. 'He decided "I need someone who will do what I want."'

Mahmood was happy to stay at the Home Office. Miliband, however, is distressed that Burnham did not follow through on what he understood was their arrangement (shades of his old boss Gordon Brown's resentment about his Granita restaurant leadership deal with Tony Blair in 1994). 'Ed was under the very clear impression that this had been agreed going way back,' a source says. 'Andy never said "I promise you the Treasury", but you can have a conversation in politics and, as Granita demonstrated, the two sides can remember it differently.'

Cabinet colleagues see the appointment of Miatta Fahnbulleh, Miliband's protégé, as his replacement at the department of energy as 'Ed's price for going quietly', as one put it. A former Labour cabinet minister adds: 'We need an energy transformation, not a net-zero transition, and she doesn't grasp the scale of what's needed.'

Some Labour figures fear that a passive chancellor is not the way to deliver the big changes the new PM wants. 'Strong prime

ministers don't just need but *want* strong chancellors,' a Labour veteran says, pointing out that both Brown and George Osborne were politically pro-active.

No. 10 also refused to commit to a plan for defence spending on Tuesday following the appointment of Streeting, which shocked Westminster since he had previously had very little to say on the subject. Here the private truth is more reassuring than the public vibes. Streeting had actually requested the job. He has developed ideas on how to reform defence procurement and his appointment was not only nailed down more than a week ago – the MoD was aware he was coming and was broadly happy.

More significantly, Streeting and Healey met on Monday afternoon and are understood to have thrashed out an agreement on the future funding of defence. The details are shrouded in mystery, but a defence source says: 'Everyone is pleased as punch. Wes and John sorted it between them and the MoD thinks it's getting its money, thinks it's Christmas. They also like the fact that Streeting is a political big beast.'

'Miliband, like Iran, rejects US hegemony. He thinks military action never offers a solution'

The other area where the public and private vibes differ concerns Labour unity. Burnham talked about a united team pulling together and then summarily sacked 11 Starmer loyalists from the cabinet, a cull quickly dubbed 'the night of the long eyelashes'. Darren Jones's emergence the next morning to condemn the unfunded VAT cut was seen as the revenge of the dispossessed, who had gathered in Starmer's local pub to drown their sorrows on Monday. One of their number briefed the *Times* that Burnham had 'created a faction' where one had not existed before.

A senior Labour figure who is more sympathetic to Burnham says: 'They were clearly a few glasses deep. Telling everyone you now consider yourself a faction and then at the first opportunity wading into the new Prime Minister is just inept.'

The Starmerites are in no real position to complain. 'We weren't good enough,' a close ally of Starmer admits.

No. 10 rejects the idea that the reshuffle was evidence of a leftward lurch, pointing out that Burnham kept Mahmood at the Home Office to pursue her migrant crackdown (loathed by many Labour MPs) and Pat McFadden at welfare, which suggests an effort to reform soaring state handouts.

In cabinet on Tuesday, both Streeting and Heidi Alexander, the Transport Secretary, spoke about the need for a 'culture change' to end the briefing against ministers, a feature of the Starmer regime. 'If you feel like you're part of a team,' Alexander said, 'you're able to make decisions and govern more effectively without looking over your shoulder.'

Loyalists also claim the chaotic reshuffle, in which Rachel Reeves rejected the post of education secretary and ministerial candidates were stacked up in No. 10 late into Monday evening, is evidence that Burnham is a different beast from Starmer. He spent around 20 minutes with each appointee. 'Andy likes to chat to people,' a close aide says. 'He's a people person. He wanted to genuinely have a discussion about what each secretary of state wants to achieve in their brief – which Keir certainly never wanted to do. With Keir, you were appointed and then you were out the other door, and that was that.'

Then there are the plans for No. 10 North. The outpost will be operating this week and Burnham will visit before the weekend. 'This is not a gimmick,' he told cabinet.

Not everyone on the Labour right is full of doom and gloom. 'If you'd said to me two weeks ago that John Healey, a non-ideological pragmatist, is going to be chancellor and not Ed Miliband, I would have said thank you very much,' says one well-connected figure. 'If No. 10 are going to try to run economic policy, that's no bad thing. We've just had a prime minister who was totally uninterested in economic policy, and look what happened. Miliband has been sent into exile, literally told to leave the country – but with Jonathan Powell [the national security adviser] and Varun Chandra [the business adviser] there to make sure he doesn't fuck up the US relationship too badly.' Not everyone is so sanguine. Some worry that Miliband's views are just as ideological on foreign policy as on net zero. A senior figure in the diplomatic world says: 'He has inherited his father's susceptibility to Russia. He thinks China has a lot to offer us industrially – renewables and batteries – and that we should not be "rejectionist". He would argue that Iran is a regional power and should be respected, not confronted. They, like him, reject US hegemony. He thinks military action never offers a solution.'

On a lighter note, Whitehall watchers are wondering if Miliband will take over 1 Carlton Gardens, the grace-and-favour home which is the traditional perk of foreign secretaries, but which has also been occupied by Cabinet Office ministers in recent years. Louise Haigh, the new First Secretary of State, is not planning to use '1CG'. The property has two kitchens, and given Miliband's well-documented arrangements in his north London home, one former cabinet minister notes: 'That means it will be Ed "four kitchens" Miliband.'

Much, such as the government's economic policy, remains a mystery. But the gap between vibes and reality can only persist until the Budget. 'We fundamentally don't know the direction of this government until there's a fiscal event,' a Labour adviser says. 'There will be a crunch moment in the autumn where we will know. Andy's got some choices to make.' Get them wrong and the voters will be suing for divorce from another Labour prime minister.

Ex-Boxer

We didn't smirk at his comb-over.
After work he trained the juniors
at Holden Lane gym. Always chewing.

At the twitch of his shoulder
we'd duck forwards, knowing
he'd go for our bollocks, twist them.

And not just us, always full of it:
contracts manager, market inspector,
fire officer, no one safe.

– Philip Hancock

Advance notice

An unwanted lunge should not get to court

JOAN ALEXANDER

In the late 1990s, the rules for unwanted advances in a nightclub were clear. The first line of defence was your own. Only you could decide if the advance was unwanted or not – and if not, you could apply words or force, depending on the context. 'You're not made of glass,' as my Scottish granny used to say. If the advances persisted, your male friends or a chivalrous stranger could be deployed. Occasionally, if a lech was so drunk or so unable to read the room, the situation could be escalated to a bouncer.

I was a barmaid at the Liberty club in Bridlington for the summer after my A-levels, and I watched the bouncers make the sort of careful and immediate judgments we wish social workers and police could make now. Lee and Dave had a sophisticated response scale, equivalent in shared doctrine and meticulous criteria to the US military DefCon levels. These ranged from muscle-flexed preventative peacetime readiness, through to summary justice outside behind the bins.

They knew who needed to be sent home, who was being uncharacteristically leery and needed a warning, and who was completely out of order. Those in the last category needed banning, and perhaps a word out in town, or even to someone's copper brother. Then an eye could be kept out for anything more sinister, for predatory or abusive behaviour beyond the nightclub.

All this is to say that I personally would have been mortified to report a lunge as sexual assault. My self-respect and the respect of others would be undermined by such an admission of weakness, but more importantly I wouldn't dream of inflicting the insult implied to my male friends and colleagues. I might also have worried that doing so would affect future, more welcome advances, of which there were a few that summer.

Which brings us to the Groucho Club in August 2023. After a two-bottle lunch with his father and a beery afternoon at the rugby, Patrick Spencer, soon to be MP, ended his day at the club with negronis and more wine. He made bad choices and unwanted advances to two women, giving them drunken hugs from behind. His actions were particularly unwise for a person with political ambitions. The first line of defence should be personal responsibility.

What happened next is a matter of public record: Spencer was accused of sexual assault, leading to a 1,070-day investigation and criminal trial, from the incident to a jury's verdict. Last week, he was found not guilty. The CCTV footage seems to have been unclear. Speed and angle changes perceptions of both intent and the severity of offence. Footage like this, viewed as part of a later investigation, can be a Rorschach test confirming the existing bias of the viewer. Still, without being there or seeing the club tapes, we can agree his behaviour was rude, aggressive and boorish, even if not criminal.

Yet the inconclusiveness of the CCTV does not excuse the bumbling and prolonged attempt to prosecute. The women reported the grope to the club. The police were involved. The first police investigation stalled. A new detective was appointed, and we can assume Louise Casey's 2023 finding that the Met is institutionally misogynist had a bearing on this second investigation. Eighteen months on, in March 2025, Spencer attended a voluntary interview. In May that year the CPS authorised the charges. A month later he pleaded not guilty at Westminster Magistrates' Court and the case was referred to the Crown Court. A month later the trial was fixed for July 2026. After a five-day trial and seven hours' jury deliberation, Spencer was acquitted on both counts. A conservative assessment of the costs to the public purse – police, Crown Prosecution and courts – is about £40,000. This excludes private legal fees, the long and immeasurable cost to Spencer's wife and children, and, I presume, to the women at the Groucho that night.

Spencer knows that his actions in the Groucho reflect on his judgment and character, even with a not guilty verdict. He has acknowledged that his conduct was 'not acceptable in this day and age'. No doubt the world would be better if we all behaved less stupidly. But I'm not convinced we're making progress by expecting boorish nightclub behaviour to be policed by a creaking criminal justice system.

I'm almost certain Lee and Dave would have intervened on Spencer's fateful night before he did something so stupid, and no one would have been hurt. I think society was happier when the police and courts could focus resources on the most serious dangers. Relationships between the sexes were more honest, young women were less anxious. Looking back, it may even have been a high point for feminism, and we've been going backwards ever since.

Joan Alexander is a pseudonym. She is a former civil servant.

BAROMETER

Lost counties

Rutland is to be abolished for the second time, having first been taken off the map in 1974 but then reinstated in the mid-1990s. Some other lost counties of England:
Middlesex: Abolished in 1965 and subsumed into Greater London.
Huntingdonshire: Merged with Peterborough in 1965 and then subsumed into Cambridgeshire in 1974, though it lives on as the name of a district.
Soke of Peterborough: Semi-detached part of Northamptonshire with its own county council until merged with Huntingdonshire.
Winchcombeshire: Area of what is now Gloucestershire, abolished shortly before the Norman Conquest.
Hallamshire: Area centred on Sheffield which was taken into Yorkshire.
Hullshire: Became the borough of Kingston upon Hull before becoming Humberside in 1974.
Craven: Large area of the Pennines between Keighley and Sedburgh. Later revived as the name of a district.
Inter Ripam and Mersam: Area between the Ribble and Mersey named in the Domesday Book.

40 years of hurt

Andy Burnham blamed the cost of living on '40 years of neoliberalism'. What was life like in the 1970s, before he believes neoliberalism took hold?
– In 1976, the median weekly wage for men was **£65.80** and for women **£42.40**. At 2026 prices, this would be **£456** and **£279** respectively. The latest figures show that the median male wage is now **£814.60** and median female wage **£709.60**.
– What about the low-paid? For people at the 10th percentile, the median wage in 1976 was **£44.50** for men and **£28** for women. At today's prices this would be **£308** and **£194**. Current wages for workers at the 10th percentile are **£513** and **£477.20**.

Rough estimate

Andy Burnham declared that his first priority as PM was to end rough sleeping. He made a similar promise when he became mayor of Greater Manchester, when he said that he would end rough sleeping by 2020. How did that go?
Rough sleepers in Greater Manchester from annual autumn shapshot:

2017	**268**	2022	**102**
2018	**241**	2023	**149**
2019	**151**	2024	**154**
2020	**125**	2025	**197**
2021	**90**		

Across England, rough sleeping has followed a similar pattern, falling from **4,751** in 2017 to a low of **2,443** in 2021 then rebounding to **4,793** in 2025.

DOUGLAS MURRAY

The Wild West of political speculation

It's hard to hold anyone responsible for anything today in British politics. That's because no sooner have the facts emerged than everybody in Westminster has played another game of musical chairs. If the word 'amusing' can be used in the same paragraph as 'attempted beheading' allow me one amusing example.

Last month, a 30-year-old asylum seeker from Sudan allegedly attempted to behead a local man on the streets of Belfast. The attack was apparently caught on video. Everyone was geared up to make their points. The left was preparing to argue 'So you're saying all asylum seekers are beheaders, are you?', while the right was gearing up to say: 'We must hold people accountable.' Then it turned out that at the time our lovely Sudanese import had been fast-tracked into the country, the home secretary was Suella Braverman and the immigration minister was Robert Jenrick.

The unfortunate fact that the Belfast suspect entered the country as Braverman and Jenrick were serving in a Tory government (both later defected to Reform) meant that neither the Tories nor Reform could make any political capital over this ghastly case. That is the way of our present politics. Historic immigration wave? Don't worry, that's five years and four prime ministers ago.

Which brings me to someone who turns out to be a relative constant of British politics: Shabana Mahmood. After Andy Burnham's reshuffle, the Home Secretary stayed put. Which seems a good idea, given she's doing as good a job as any Labour MP is likely to do in one of the hardest roles in government. But it also means I can ask what the hell she thought she was up to in relation to two terror-related cases of the past fortnight.

After the death of Ann Widdecombe, Mahmood was one of those who warned the public against 'speculating' on any potential motives. Fair enough. We know the drill. But then someone must explain to me how within not many hours of Widdecombe's death, and the announcement that this country's finest policemen were starting to think that it might have been a 'targeted killing', with counterterror police then leading the investigation, another story broke.

The weekend after Widdecombe's death, Suffolk Police and Counter Terrorism Policing suddenly shut down an 'Ijtima' (an Islamic festival) at a rented stately home called Shrubland Palace, near Ipswich. On the Sunday morning, the Muslim attendees were told to evacuate the event. There was an armed police presence and a slew of speculation about what had happened. Within 24 hours both Mahmood and the now ex-prime minister Keir Starmer had plenty to say.

Starmer took to social media: 'Shocking news that counterterrorism police are investigating a credible, serious threat targeted at an Islamic event in Suffolk. Thanks to the quick action taken by police and the organisers, nobody was hurt. My message is clear: I will not tolerate any attacks on our Muslim communities, or any form of anti-Muslim hatred.' Meanwhile, Humza Yousaf, the former first minister of Scotland, claimed the incident could have been 'a terrorist attack of unimaginable scale'.

After the death of Widdecombe, Mahmood warned against 'speculating' on potential motives

Mahmood's own public statement read: 'Terrorism police are leading an investigation into a credible threat to those attending the UK Ijtima festival this weekend. I thank Suffolk Police, Counter Terrorism Policing, and the organisers for their swift and effective response that undoubtedly saved lives. Twelve individuals have now been arrested. I know this is deeply concerning news for British Muslims. We must stand against hatred and we must unite around our shared belief in a country that is open, generous and tolerant to all our communities.'

I quote all this at length because it's interesting, isn't it? As I pointed out last week, on one side of the ledger it seems to be 'Don't speculate. Don't prejudice any trial' and on the other it's the Wild West. Suffolk police's intervention 'undoubtedly' saved lives, says the Home Secretary. Only thanks to officers' intervention 'nobody was hurt', announces the then prime minister.

Some readers will wonder why they have not heard more of this anti-Muslim 9/11-style plot. That is because it would appear that the men who were taken into police custody were flying a drone in the area or something similar, were interested in the events at Shrubland Palace and that there was absolutely no plan to carry out one of the biggest terrorist attacks in history. All of those arrested were released except one, who was charged with an unrelated offence.

By then, what remains of the *Independent* and other left-wing media had joined in, breaking rules they otherwise like to set. The former publication even ran a piece from an attendee of the festival. The contributor – an imam named Sohayb Peerbhai – described how he and other attendees 'wondered if we would meet danger on our way out', even after a large armed police presence had arrived on the scene. He described the whole thing as 'a near miss'.

So I have to ask two things. First, it seemed to me when the Suffolk story broke that it was a little too convenient. A prominent anti-open-borders Reform spokeswoman had been beaten to death in her home. Strong sentiments were flowing. And then, as if to remind us that all sides and anyone can do something bad, along comes a 'far-right extremism, anti-Muslim terror plot' story, displayed on the BBC's website alongside updates on the Widdecombe case. Why? And how did the police and the top of government get this so terribly wrong?

The second thing I have to ask – and I am sorry to have to do so two weeks in a row (but these are two weeks in which one government minister has remained in place, so allow me the luxury) – is: what is the difference in prejudicing a fair trial when it comes to the Widdecombe case and when it comes to the Suffolk 'far-right, Islamophobic, mass-casualty terror event' that wasn't? Someone explain it, please?

'He's not the messiah, he's a very northern boy.'

Left hanging

Radical socialists are taking over the Democratic party

FREDDY GRAY

Tuesday 4 August could prove to be a turning point in American political history. If Democratic primary voters in Michigan choose Haley Stevens, a moderate, as their Senate nominee, the party establishment should stagger on, perhaps up to and beyond the presidential election of 2028.

It's more likely, however, that the Democrats will elect Dr Abdul El-Sayed, a pro-Palestine radical who supports Medicare for All and the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. El-Sayed's victory would confirm that the hard left is the coming force in national politics, and suggest that the long-anticipated socialist takeover of the oldest party in the US – the party of Andrew Jackson, Harry Truman and Bill Clinton – is finally under way. Just as Donald Trump's MAGA movement began to devour a rotten Republican party in 2015, a vengeful left-wing populism seems ready to swallow the much-loathed Democratic elite. The only part that's missing is the element of surprise.

El-Sayed has impeccable credentials for a 21st-century internationalist progressive – or what right-wingers might call 'a third-worldist'. A practising Muslim from the affluent suburbs of Detroit, the son of an Egyptian engineer, he captained the lacrosse team at Oxford, earned a doctorate in public health, and turned into a podcaster. He has a beard, a buff torso, and walks out on stage to the rap song 'Changes' by Tupac Shakur:

> Can't a brother get a little peace?
> It's war on the streets
> And the war in the Middle East.
>
> Instead of war on poverty
> They got a war on drugs
> So the police can bother me.

He insists he's 'a scientist not a socialist' and rejects ideological labels. But that's what a Trotskyite entryist would say. He has campaigned, done podcasts and even filmed a workout video with the Twitch streamer Hasan Piker, who has said 'America deserved 9/11' and praises Mao Zedong as 'one of the great leaders of this world'.

El-Sayed is not formally aligned with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The group has, however, reportedly sent volunteers and resources to back him in Michigan, as well as to Francesca Hong's campaign in neighbouring Wisconsin. Hong is an outright DSA member who is bidding to be America's first socialist governor. She promises to 'tax the rich, fund our schools, and stop AI data centres' – and naturally she's ahead in the polls.

The DSA is on a roll, having transformed in recent years from a club for fringe eccentrics into arguably the most effective political organisation in America. In January, Zohran Mamdani, a dues-paying member since 2017, became mayor of New York. His apparent moderation in office has disappointed hardliners, though he has imposed the rent controls he promised, and this week posted a dramatic face-to-camera address in which he called Bibi Netanyahu 'a war criminal' and appealed for his arrest.

American socialists have learned to 'lean in' to their more native seditious temperament

Last month, three Mamdani-backed radicals won congressional primaries in his city. Perhaps the most colourful is Darializa Avila Chevalier, a DSA hardliner who wears funky spectacles, attended a pro-Hamas rally and wants to ban borders, the police and prisons. Darializa, a graduate of Columbia University, is known to be an admirer of Assata Shakur, the late Black Panther, who was Tupac Shakur's godmother or step-aunt or something (family is a white patriarchal concept).

In 1977, Assata was found guilty of murdering a state trooper in New Jersey. She then escaped prison, found asylum in Cuba and spent her last years in Havana writing impenetrable revolutionary prose. She's now all the rage in trendy circles, having clearly been the inspiration for the female lead in Paul Thomas Anderson's multi-award-winning film *One Battle After Another*. Radical chic never goes out of fashion.

Another DSA darling is the Ethiopian-born lawyer Melat Kiros, who last month won her congressional primary in Denver, having also campaigned for a US arms embargo on Israel, Medicare for All and the annihilation of ICE. At a recent event for the Tigrayan diaspora in Colorado, she called for 'getting more people who have heritage in the global south into office' in order to achieve a 'reckoning' for America's 'exploitative and extractive' role in the world.

In the past, DSA members tended to emphasise the 'Democratic' rather than the 'Socialist' part, as if their worldview were informed by the European centre-left. Now, however, American socialists have learnt to 'lean in', as the feminists say, to their more native seditious temperament. Last week, the DSA released their new 'Workers Deserve More!' online platform. Complete with cutesy cartoons of red roses and clenched-fist salutes, the platform explains to the masses why the 'capitalist oligarchy' must be destroyed. 'We push these demands to their furthest extent today,' it says, 'so we can fight for their fullest realisation in a socialist future.'

The platform makes Andy Burnham sound like a neoliberal sell-out. It calls for the closure of all US military bases overseas, the stopping of all sanctions on Cuba, Venezuela and Iran, the abolition of prisons

and universal free housing. 'Establish public ownership of the largest corporations and essential industries,' it says. 'Abolish the Senate… replace the President and Supreme Court with an executive and judiciary chosen by and subordinate to Congress.'

Tear up the US constitution, in other words, though interestingly the manifesto includes no mention of restricting the right to bear arms. That's because guns may be necessary if democratic means don't work soon. And as this week's arson attack on an ICE building in New York and other recent outbreaks of left-wing violence show, some activists are done waiting.

The DSA vision is anathema to the vast majority of American voters. The Republican party sees in the group's frightening rise an opportunity to ward off a humiliating thrashing in the midterms. Hold on to Donnie, for fear of something commie – that, essentially, is Team Trump's message as November's elections approach.

'There is a resurgence of the communist menace in our land,' averred the President in his 4 July speech celebrating America's 250th anniversary. 'It's like a cancer, you got to cut it out.'

Marco Rubio, the Secretary of State and increasingly the favourite to be Republican nominee in 2028, has also sensed the moment. In a speech last week at his Department's 'Ministerial on the Resurgence of Political Terrorism', Rubio addressed radical leftism: 'It is a poisonous resentment cloaked in the language of equality, justice, liberation; an overwhelming need to tear down what greater men have built, to wreck what is beautiful and right, on behalf of people who are only filled with ugliness.' The State Department duly rolled out a new report which portrays the DSA as part of a Cuban-inspired subversion campaign 'designed to turn America against itself'.

The New Left taps into the rage of the downwardly mobile metropolitan middle classes

Yet the Trump administration is today best known for starting another unstoppable war in the Middle East, failing to bring down the cost-of-living and the kleptocratic tendencies of the First Family and its cronies. That's hardly an ideal position from which to launch a noble defence of western values. The Cassandras of Never-Trump Republicanism always warned us that the Donald, with his unique combination of vanity and venality, would open the door to revolution from the left.

There is moreover a parallel, in style if not in substance, between the DSA's rhetoric and the early radicalism of MAGA in 2016 – an eagerness to say the unsayable, to horrify the elite and shock the liberal media. America's angry left and right have a symbiotic relationship, which is why DSA leaders are now happy to be grilled on Fox News, just as Trumpist talking heads seek out clashes on MSNBC and CNN. If legacy journalism hates you, you must be right.

Trumpism won by appealing to lower-income voters, especially in rural areas, who felt abandoned by globalism. Today's New Left, by contrast, taps into something arguably more powerful: the rage of the downwardly mobile metropolitan middle classes, who feel impoverished by inflation and existentially challenged by Artificial Intelligence. The psephologist Nate Silver pointed out this week that some 40 per cent of 'post-grads' who earn less than $60,000 a year describe themselves as 'very liberal' – which in America means left-wing. 'The sweet spot for the DSA,' argued Silver, is among the 'very college-educated but not particularly well-off'.

According to the horseshoe theory, too, the growing loathing of Israel, and the widespread resentment over Tel Aviv's influence over Washington, means that populism makes unlikely bedfellows left and right. El-Sayed hinted at that on a podcast this month when he said that he 'wouldn't be surprised' if followers of Marjorie Taylor Greene, the MAGA darling turned furious anti-Zionist who also bemoans the hellacious costs of healthcare, end up supporting him.

Michigan is not New York or Colorado, to put it mildly. It's a blue-collar swing state which voted for Trump twice. That's one of the reasons El-Sayed is careful to distance himself from some of the more inciteful leftist rhetoric and emphasise his love of America. It's also why the attacks against him – many funded by pro-Israel groups – call him a terrorist sympathiser and 'too radical for Michigan'.

El-Sayed's views might once have made him utterly unpalatable to the Midwestern bourgeoisie. Today, however, he speaks to the growing number of disenfranchised Americans who have been, as he puts it, 'working the same job for 20 years and feel like [they're] on the cusp of losing it to a robot'.

At three well-attended rallies in Detroit, Lansing and Grand Rapids last weekend, El-Sayed was supported by Senator Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the two biggest stars of the American left. Under a 'The People vs The Powerful' banner, Bernie, AOC and Abdul together presented a DSA-lite platform that appears to bridge the narrowing gap between the Democratic mainstream and the leftist bank. They railed against the corruption of Trump and Washington, the power of the 'special interests', 'corporate greed' and 'dark money'. They accused Israel of genocide in Gaza and denounced 'unconditional US military aid' to Tel Aviv, but stopped short of the DSA's more outrageous positions.

Sanders, 84, is the retiring but not shy grandpa of American socialism. Never affiliated with the DSA, he came close to winning the presidential nomination in 2016, but was scuppered by Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Machine. AOC, by contrast, is now 36, finally old enough to be Commander-in-Chief, and faces no comparable enemy. She refuses to rule out the possibility of a presidential bid (in other words, she's running).

A proud DSA member, she nonetheless risked the ire of the group by refusing to boycott Israel entirely in 2024. Even Democratic strategists who despise her politics admit that she has become a more capable operator. If El-Sayed and Hong both win in August, and then again in November, her stock will rise higher still.

America's choice in 2028, then, could well be Marco Rubio, the anti-communist Cuban Latino, or Ocasio-Cortez, the socialist Puerto Rican Latina. In an ever more unhappy age, she would be the change agent. *Hasta la revolucion!*

Fifteen Years and Counting

Today, fifteen years later and counting,
your formal raincoat still belongs to me.
It's the black one you bought for funerals
when your own old age was fast approaching.
I'd leave it at home, safe from rips or stains,
but every time I head for the trade fair
and shrug it on in the hotel lobby,
it pauses to give me an awkward hug.

– Matthew Stewart

Save the date

Why are people being randomly banned from Hinge?

MELISSA KITE

If you want to know what the ninth circle of Hell is like, join a dating site. I didn't want to join a dating site, for I am happily ensconced, but I joined one in the interests of research because something very dark is going on in the world of dating apps, and it has something to do with two bugbears of mine: safeguarding and AI.

If you could mate two monsters of modern life to produce a deranged creature capable of devouring human rights, then those two monsters would be safeguarding and AI.

Recently, I began to notice a deluge of complaints on online forums from people protesting their innocence after being banned from dating apps for no apparent reason. Reddit is awash with these demented souls, some of whom are so appalled at being summarily accused of unknown offences of a predatory nature that they are presenting as nigh-on suicidal.

Girding my loins, and all that, I decided to join the app users were claiming was the worst offender, Hinge, the largest dating app in America, with 30 million users worldwide. It is owned by Match, which also owns Tinder. Match Group proudly states that in the interests of safety, 80 per cent of harmful accounts are now removed using AI before a real user ever reports them.

Now, you have to realise that in joining Hinge, I obviously set out to behave as mildly as I could. I wanted to perform an experiment, so I resolved to start out as innocently as possible, before feeling my way to flirting and maybe seeing what passes for offensive, which I assumed wouldn't be much.

I made my profile polite and correct, uploaded professional head shots and did exactly as the app directed by ticking the 'like' icon on certain profiles to show the sort of person I was looking for. I made one comment on one user's profile, which was the mildest little flirt I could think of. 'Nice tux!' I tried to write on a picture of a chap dressed smartly at a wedding. But the system instantly flashed up a warning that the comment was inappropriate. So I deleted it and didn't post it. I didn't contact or message another user. I simply viewed profiles for 15 minutes, and that was that.

The next morning, I was amazed to receive an obnoxious email from Hinge entitled 'Your account has been removed': 'Hi Melissa, Your account was banned for breaking one or more of our policies. You can log in to Hinge to learn more about why your account was banned and how to appeal, if that information is available to you.'

When I logged in, it referred me only to the acres-long general terms and conditions. So the information was not available to me. I felt like Joseph K in *The Trial*, accused of a crime I knew nothing about, which my accusers would not detail. Actually, it was worse. Even Joseph K was put on trial. Melissa K would not get that chance. How could I decide to go through the appeals process, not knowing the offence?

I deleted the app. Ironically, the Hinge slogan is 'Hinge – designed to be deleted'. Now I knew why. I was so paranoid, I feared that if I left Hinge on my phone it might start spreading rumours about me to my other apps. My bank might remove me as an undesirable. Well, I don't know how these things work, do I? You can't be too careful.

I felt like Joseph K in The Trial, accused of a crime I knew nothing about

I then contacted Hinge head office to say I was a journalist, and to ask what I had done. It is at this point companies usually admit their mistake, apologise, and offer you free stuff. But after two days, a Hinge spokesman came back to me with an even more obnoxious email, rambling and bureaucratic: 'Thank you for reaching out. While we understand you are raising concerns about your own account, due to privacy requirements, we cannot comment on the specifics of an individual enforcement in the media.'

I took that to infer that what I had done might be so bad they couldn't possibly embarrass me by spelling it out. 'We recommend submitting an appeal,' he said, while a lengthy briefing with bullet points explained that every appeal is reviewed by a human moderator in a 'Trust and Safety Team'.

These moderators have the ability either to take action on a report or 'escalate the case' to a senior moderator or safety specialist. I decided this could get a lot worse if I chose to appeal. I was better off remaining frozen, as in the frozen lake of Dante's ninth circle of Hell.

Look, Hinge, the bottom line is, there is no offence. I've done nothing. I know it and you know it. The AI has simply goofed up. Maybe it read my tux comment wrongly or my profile hobby of 'riding' as an attempt at innuendo. Shows you AI is as thick as mince.

I sent an email saying I'm not appealing on principle unless you tell me what I'm appealing. 'We understand this is frustrating,' came back the reply, 'and we're sorry that this hasn't been the experience you were hoping for.' But it has, really, because I set out to prove the poor demented souls on Reddit aren't lying. Hinge is moving against lots of its users. Why, I still have no idea.

It is possible they were weeding me out for reasons they cannot admit. I didn't pay a subscription and was using the free service, so my first suspicion was that dating apps might be removing people who look as if they're not going to cough up some money.

The second paranoid delusion that beset me was that Hinge had filtered me for demographic reasons. When I signed up, I noticed some very woke promotional shots of all sorts of people not like me finding love. I had to answer a preposterously long list of sexual- and gender-orientation questions, as well as describe my colour, race and religion.

Thinking back on this, and feeling utterly persecuted, I put my deranged and paranoid theory to Hinge that I suspected it had programmed its AI to filter out certain categories of people in certain numbers at certain times, in order to keep its brand woke. Was a 54-year-old straight, binary woman not wanted in the mix this month? Its response was not to answer that question at all.

So let's give them the benefit of the doubt and say this is a barmy idea they've driven me to imagine with their mysterious secrecy.

I would still argue that by refusing to spell out why they don't want me, Hinge is happy to allow aspersions to remain, while challenging me to a kind of techno-duel in which I have to weigh up how lucky I feel that the system won't misconstrue my non-offence even more if I try to dispute it formally.

This is par for the course with safeguarding. Throw some muck randomly and brazen it out is too often a company's policy. With AI it's even worse. Hide behind unknown algorithms to be as rude and as dis-inclusive as you fancy.

AI is the only legal way a company could tell its customers to 'Naff off, we don't want your kind!'. That is what AI is so good at. Being damnably rude and unfair and obnoxious and, of course, just plain old wrong.

Natural England shouldn't be above the law

NICK LANE

To restore nature and rebuild rural trust, the government must ensure that regulators don't misuse their powers

A High Court ruling has found that conditions imposed by Natural England (NE) on game shoots were 'irrational' and 'misinterpreting the scope of their powers'.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) brought the case, arguing that approach had created significant uncertainty for shoots – even forcing some to close.

Handing down judgment at the Royal Courts of Justice, the Court found NE had acted unlawfully by adopting an interpretation of 'release' that exceeded the meaning of the legislation enacted by Parliament. The Court ruled that NE cannot impose conditions preventing the keeping of gamebirds on site prior to release.

In his summary, Mr Justice Ritchie said the conditions imposed by NE were 'irrational' due to them 'misinterpreting the scope of their powers'.

BASC brought the challenge only after repeated attempts to resolve the issue directly. The association engaged with NE's leadership team and set out its concerns in detail before issuing proceedings. Those concerns were ignored, leaving legal action the only remaining route.

The judgment confirms that public bodies must exercise their powers within the limits set by Parliament.

BASC chief executive Ian Bell said: 'This judgment is not about shooting vs a regulator. It is about the simple principle that public bodies must act within the law, just as they expect everyone else to.

'The community that BASC represents are custodians of the countryside. They manage land, deliver conservation and follow the rules. They are entitled to a regulator that does the same. Today the High Court has confirmed that NE did not.

'We did everything we could to avoid this. We engaged with NE's leadership and we were ignored. The result is a judicial review that should never have been necessary and public money that should never have been spent.

'BASC has proven today that we are willing to use every available tool in the fight to protect shooting and the community we represent.

'BASC has also continually argued that the countryside needs a regulator that works. We hope today's judgment is the moment NE chooses to change and we are willing to be part of that conversation to protect the future of rural Britain.

'BASC will consider the full terms of the written judgement before considering its application for costs.'

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP, chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Shooting and Conservation, said: 'We have been working closely with BASC on these gamebird issues. I am delighted that the High Court has come out in favour of BASC's argument and that common sense has prevailed.'

The High Court ruling reaches beyond gamebird licensing. It asks how environmental regulation can command the confidence of those who live and work with it every day.

To restore nature and rebuild rural trust, government must ensure regulators act within the law, respect Parliament's limits and work constructively with countryside communities. That is good government.

Labour should use this judgment to reset how rural regulation is designed, communicated and delivered.

For more information go to basc.org.uk

BASC
The British Association for Shooting & Conservation

Pipe dreams

The lost art of contemplative smoking

JAMES DIXON

The old pipe smoker has become a bit of a figure of fun, an idiosyncratic oddity whom the young find ridiculous, if they notice him at all. This makes me rather sad because to me he's a little bit heroic. Picture him sitting on a bench in the shade of a tree, the sun shining beyond, carefully filling his bowl, tamping the tobacco down with his thumb, before striking a match and coaxing the first few curls of bluish smoke into the afternoon air. It's a ritual free from any sense of hurry and one from which we could all learn.

Indeed, hurrying would defeat the point of pipe smoking. The ritual itself, slow and steady, is part of the pleasure. I would argue, too, that it's part of the usefulness (though I wouldn't suggest anyone think of pipe smoking in such terms – that, too, would defeat the point).

Compare this calm old pipe-smoking gent with today's vaper, absent-mindedly sucking on a fluorescent tube while rushing down the high street in a berry-scented cloud, scrolling through his phone and noticing little.

I could probably rest my case here, but I won't. The pipe smoker deserves more.

He inhabits time; the vaper merely fills it. And the contrast, I suspect, shows up much more than a simple change in smoking habits – it tells us quite a lot about the evolution of our culture.

In my modest and unfashionable defence of the pipe, I would like to put a few ideas forward. But first, I'm not asking people to start smoking. Obviously, it's bad for you. The public health arguments against tobacco are well-known and substantial. But, also, people do smoke, and the form this smoking takes is important. The dominant forms of smoking reflect the civilisations that embrace them. Pipes belong to an age of patience and introspection; cigarettes to an age of speed and convenience. Vapes are an electronic extension to the cigarette, bubblegum for modernity's brats – for those who can no longer tolerate a single empty moment.

The pipe isn't simply a form of nicotine delivery. You need to choose your tobacco, then fill your bowl, packing it correctly (which takes a bit of practice). You need to light it carefully and probably relight it a few times before you're done. It takes a good while to smoke. Most people can polish off a cigarette in around five minutes, whereas a pipe with a medium-sized bowl will take you more like half an hour to get through.

And it demands contemplation as you do so. On this point, I'll get the obvious out the way immediately: both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien were devoted pipe smokers, which is an argument in the pipe's favour if ever there was one. Reading, writing, long, winding conversations, gardening, fishing, sitting still, thinking… these are all the preserve of the pipe smoker, at least as I'm romanticising him. We associate the pipe with the idea of reflection because reflection is the reward you get from taking your time over something and sitting with your thoughts.

Hurrying would defeat the point of pipe smoking –the ritual itself, slow and steady, is part of the pleasure

The pleasure isn't merely chemical. It's temporal – and, dare I say it, might even be spiritual.

Cigarettes, by contrast, belong to industrialised modernity. They became popular in the last century because they were perfectly adapted to the industrial age: quicker to smoke, easier to mass-produce, and in all ways better suited to increasingly urban, fast-paced lives than pipes or cigars. Workers didn't have half an hour to spare for their smoke – they had five minutes at break-time. Cigarettes compressed smoking into something very efficient.

However, at least cigarettes retained one civilising feature. You still needed to stop, spark up, handle smoke and fire (a primitive and glorious thing), and set five uninterrupted minutes aside. Many conversations, friendships and romances have begun in smoking areas over the years. I used to smoke when I went clubbing just so I could be outside and chat to people instead of trying to dance inside.

The vape abolishes the pause and infantilises the whole affair. There is little preparation to it, other than filling it up from time to time, much like you fill up the washer fluid in your car before a long journey, and keeping it as well-charged as your smartphone. It takes no real intention, no time, no deliberation. People vape indoors. It's mindless and it smells bad. Instead of punctuating life, your nicotine hit becomes more of a permanent background hum.

Modern Britain increasingly distrusts the idea of doing nothing. We have carried out a very thorough job of eliminating idle moments, filling them with podcasts, phones, notifications, productivity, optimisation. Yet the greatest insights often arrive during unoccupied time, and even if you're not struck by a genius idea, you at least need this unoccupied time for your sanity's sake.

Pipe smoking, and all its ritual, and all the time it takes, gives it to you. Britain might be a happier, more reflective country if more of us took to spending more time in shady spots with a pipe on the go and nothing but our thoughts for company.

Find yourself a way to sit in stillness, perhaps with a ritual of sorts, perhaps not, and switch off for a bit. And please, please don't vape. It looks silly and no grown-up should smell of cherries.

MADELINE GRANT

The PM should put on a tie

A brass fanfare; a wide establishing shot of five men in three-piece suits, seated in a library of leather-bound tomes – this is Harold Macmillan doing informal. The scene is from a 1959 party political broadcast, which purports to show a 'relaxed chat' between Macmillan and four of his ministers, all of whom he refers to by their cabinet titles. Almost everything about it is artificial (including quite possibly the claim that it took place the day after the parliamentary recess). Watching it now is a reminder of two things, perhaps contradictory. First, that prime ministers have always played a clever and not entirely authentic game when it comes to informality; second, how far we've fallen.

Can you imagine the equivalent today? A T-shirted Andy Burnham sits on a high stool around a breakfast bar with Ed Miliband, Louise Haigh and Miatta Fahnbulleh. Through the glass sliding doors to the patio, we can glimpse Angela Rayner in a paddling pool, vape in hand. A manipulated and studied informality may well be the only thing Burnham has in common with Macmillan (though I suppose both of them also knifed their immediate predecessor and then claimed they hadn't).

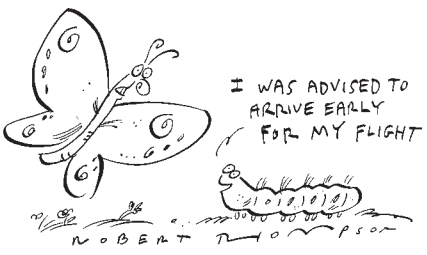
Burnham has kept his messaging vague when it comes to energy policy, immigration and the economy. But he *has* made it abundantly clear that he will favour T-shirts and waxed jackets over collared shirts and ties; that he thinks informality of dress is something he must make a firm stance on. This has been a feature of his campaign ever since he decided Sir Keir needed defenestrating. His Makerfield ads – and his official social media accounts – featured a bizarre cartoon avatar of his own face, as if he were a new CBeebies character and not the prospective leader of a great power.

Burnham, like Macmillan, knows exactly what he's doing in this regard. The latter wanted to project the image of a patrician country gentleman with his hand lightly on the tiller of the ship of state, when in fact he was a neurotic intellectual. Burnham wants to project the idea that he's someone you might meet in a Manchester pub and come away thinking 'what a good bloke', rather than a career politician who's up to his knees in every Labour catastrophe of the past two decades. The difference is that Burnham's informality is of a demonstrably lower standard: the clothes are of poorer quality, the conversation is more banal, the entire schtick is designed to hit a lower common denominator.

How did we get here? As with so much about the decline of standards in Britain, there is a Blair-shaped answer. 'Call me Tony' deliberately allowed himself to be photographed wearing T-shirts, football shirts and even – repulsively – swimwear. All this faux-chumminess was an attempt to show that politicians are 'just like us'. But of course, politicians aren't just like us, and nor should they be, given the importance of the job. The nation is facing probably its direst crisis of identity, demographics, defence and the economy certainly since the 1970s and perhaps since the war. If someone is going to come on television and tell me there's going to be rolling blackouts or that the Russians have sunk a cruiser, the very least they can do is wear a bloody tie.

Burnham seems to believe that if you address the public in a 'dressed-down style', they'll swallow any old rubbish

Burnham's appeal to a twee, folksy casualness, then, is a misstep. It rings discordantly with the serious demands of our times. The shallowness, however, is typical of his words and actions: for instance, the idea that all it takes to fix the machinery of government is 'problem solving, not point scoring'; or the implication that until he entered Downing Street no one had ever thought of just working together and being nice to each other. Of course, Burnham isn't really that stupid, which points to a more worrying conclusion – he appears to believe that if you address the British public in a 'dressed-down style' and with a familiar enough register, they'll swallow any old rubbish.



Infantilisation has become a part of daily life. As cracks begin to show ever more regularly in British infrastructure, many of us grit our teeth when another train cancellation or delay is announced in the style of a toddler wetting themself. 'We're sorry, your train has had a boo-boo, please don't be angry.' We have all become familiar with the primary colours and crude animations that dominate NHS announcements, advertising aimed at adults and even some civil service comms.

This isn't just an aesthetic problem. Accompanying the tweeness and informality is a new dominance of mawkishness and sentiment when it comes to policy itself. Every law has to be named after some kind of tragedy, every policy announcement to be revealed on social media by a sad-looking member of the public. In the House of Commons, victims are constantly invoked, as are the *X Factor*-style backstories of politicians themselves. All of this is an attempt to avoid scrutiny, and it makes it extremely difficult for anyone to raise voices of opposition, even constructively, to badly drafted laws that hinder good governance.

Would Burnham wearing a suit and tie suddenly solve our national problems? No, but it might at least project the idea that he is serious about trying to do so. It would show he understands that being PM is a job where you're not trying to be everybody's bezzie mate, but one where you have to make important and complicated decisions which at their extremes can be matters of life and death.

The biggest problem may not be Burnham himself, but rather the fact that many people do actually buy this schmaltz. Some do genuinely believe that a government is 'more relatable' and somehow, indefinably, 'better' if conducted by a man in a T-shirt and a pair of New Balance trainers. Perhaps it will take the Burnham premiership to finally disabuse them of this invidious deception.

SPECTATOR.COM/QUITERIGHT
Join Michael Gove and Madeline Grant for a mix of politics, culture and mischief.

Pit perfect

Don't fall for the deodorant con

PHILIP HENSHER

As summers grow hotter, the one thing that self-appointed experts seem absolutely agreed upon is the need for a blast of chemicals to cover up the merest possibility of anything resembling the smell of a warm body. One Mariah G. Humbert, an American etiquette dictator, was asked by the *Guardian* about this and insisted: 'Deodorant is absolutely necessary. The way you care for yourself and your hygiene is a form of self-respect, but also respect for the people you work with. It's the same socially.' Of course you should use deodorant! It's vital to hygiene! It's like wiping your bum!

Miss Humbert's other point, that the lavish application of deodorant shows respect for people around you, could only have been made by someone who has never eaten breakfast in the budget Hilton hotel in Bath, or similar. The mass assembly of recently risen middle management on a training course and coach parties of ageing Americans produces a fug of recently applied aluminium, and renders the idea of eating any food in this chemical miasma nauseating. A morning trip on the District Line, pressed up against estate agents intensely sprayed, like crops, with anti-pong prophylactic, infallibly induces a vile headache. The afternoon ride home is much less obnoxious, when the deodorant and the 'respect' and 'hygiene' have faded and there is nothing worse to deal with than a few clean bodies.

The truth is that, unless there is something wrong with you, you probably don't need deodorant to mask anything, and any doctor will tell you that the aim of antiperspirant to stop you sweating would be a terribly bad one, if it worked. In general, the only thing necessary in any condition is a bath every day and to change your clothes at the same interval, making considerate use of washing machine and dry cleaner. If you wear the same suit to work every day for the month of July, no amount of Right Guard will render your presence appealing.

About 40 years ago, I had the staggering revelation that an intimate encounter with another person was always dismal to repulsive if the nervous application of deodorant was detectable. On the other hand, the whiff of someone fresh from the sea, an energetic walk in the park, even a couple of hours dancing shirtless in a club, could be very appealing. I took a radical decision. I didn't believe I smelt worse than the rank and file of humanity. From the late 1980s to now, I have never bought or used deodorant or antiperspirant. There was no detectable social effect from dropping the stuff from one day to the next. No consequences seem to have followed in a life otherwise dedicated to cleanliness and a nice clean shirt. For most people, I'm convinced, it's a gigantic conspiracy.

The whiff of someone fresh from a couple of hours dancing shirtless in a club could be very appealing

Modern deodorants have been around since the 19th century, but really took off when advertisers invested heavily in paranoia and self-doubt. A product called Odorono coined the bleak condition of B.O. in an advertising campaign of 1919. The thing was – you might have it, but nobody would tell you! The only way forward – buy Odorono, in massive quantities. There might have been some elementary objections to this proposition. The first could have been that the reason that your dearest friends aren't telling you that you smell is that you don't smell. The second is that if, in the different world of 1919, you do whiff a bit, the answer might be to take a bath every day and wear clean clothes.

But the commercial exploitation of paranoia is a very powerful one, surviving any number of changes of habits. Maybe you are one of those rare unfortunates who really do stink. After all, the advertisers suggest, nobody, not even your husband or wife or most direct friend would ever tell you. For most people, this is a Procter & Gamble remake of Pascal's Wager. You don't think you smell that bad. You probably don't, in fact. But a tiny doubt creeps in; let's not risk the small possibility of being catastrophically wrong about this. For the same reason, people like me who just don't use it generally keep quiet about the fact. A friend who once confessed to me that he doesn't use it either admitted that he still buys a stick of the stuff every so often, throwing the last unused tube away. His wife hasn't noticed that his hygiene is limited to soap and water, and he's not planning to tell her.

For most people, the force of self-doubt and worry is impossible to escape. The only way forward is to invest consistently in the global deodorant industry, forecast to rise to $47 billion in the next decade. Whether the increasingly heavy use of deodorants has any causal relationship to the well-documented reluctance of Gen Z to go to bed with each other must remain a matter of speculation.

I have an experiment to suggest to the confident. For a week or so, just lay off deodorants. Don't tell anyone. Carry on with a daily bath, towelling and drying thoroughly. Wear clean clothes daily. It's not compulsory, but if you want to smell particularly nice, give yourself a squirt of something handsome. I recommend Andy Tauer's deliciously smutty leather and birchwood, cowboy-inspired Lonestar Memories. If people are starting to offer you unsolicited advice about your personal hygiene, then by all means return to the heavy use of Lynx Jungle Fresh XXL, but you deserve everyone's sympathy. It must be pretty awful to smell worse than that.

MATTHEW PARRIS

Kemi needs her centrists

Every time I begin to see Kemi Badenoch as a plausible leader not of the Conservative party alone, but of the whole nation, something crops up to spoil it.

Don't misunderstand me. She's now an imaginable prime minister. Badenoch is beginning to impress not only old has-beens like me, who always wanted to admire her – though at first we struggled – but also a news media that had tended to dismiss the possibility of a strong Tory challenge. Many who weren't fans can't but notice a leader growing into the job. Opinion polling backs that up.

While Badenoch speaks well and has been writing impressively for newspapers like my own, the emerging regard for her capabilities is so far owed mostly to her performance at Prime Minister's Questions. Seemingly relaxed, with the hint of a smile and an air almost of amusement, she has played with Keir Starmer like a cat with a cornered mouse.

I love the unspoken 'Dear me, this will never do' in her tone. There has been mischievous humour in her dismissal of a failing PM. From the backstairs of the opposition leader's office I watched Margaret Thatcher closely over the years before her victory in 1979. I now see Badenoch already doing better than Mrs T at first seemed to. Thatcher looked nervous and sounded screechy. Badenoch is looking assured and never screeches.

So to be clear: though I may be the kind of centrist Tory whom Badenoch would regard as suspiciously wet, I want her to win. I really, really do. And I believe she can.

But so does Gavin Barwell.

From 2010 to 2017 Lord Barwell was the Conservative MP for Croydon Central. For two years he served as Theresa May's chief of staff, earning a quiet reputation among colleagues and commentators for providing pleasant, intelligent support to a tortured prime minister in almost impossible circumstances. Approachable, measured and steadfast, he served his party and the (now) Baroness May well.

Last week, according to reports, Kemi Badenoch withdrew the Conservative whip from him. Why?

I'm not one of Gavin's close friends but I know he is, like me, a Tory centrist. Like me, he does worry that elements on the Tory right risk alienating millions of potential Conservative voters in constituencies not only across the whole of south-east and south-west England, but in London, the Midlands and the north too.

He is right to worry. Luckily, the Liberal Democrats, who could equally appeal to many of these voters, seem careless of their own history, and under Sir Ed Davey's leadership appear to feel flattered, when they ought to be scared, by speculation that their party might help prop up a minority Labour government after the next election. Centrist voters may be soft in their support for the Lib Dems or the Tories but, typically, they absolutely do not want a Labour government. Their detestation will surely increase under Andy Burnham as PM.

Mrs T, like Mrs B, had strong views, but she took very great care to assemble a diverse crew

It follows that literally millions of gently, cautiously and unideologically conservative (with a small c) voters are low-hanging fruit for any version of the Tory party that doesn't seem to be actively trying to spook them. Badenoch – ever on guard against Reform on her right – seems not to have noticed the potential to waver of voters marginally to her left. She should cast her net on the other side.

Why doesn't she? Allow me to speculate.

Mrs B has been mightily irritated (one senses) by the emergence of a pro-Conservative movement, external to the parliamentary party, calling itself Prosper UK. Prominent Conservatives like David Gauke, Ruth Davidson and Andy Street, as well as Gavin Barwell, formed the movement in January this year.

I went to their launch meeting. They were my kind of crowd, yet I felt just a hint of reserve. There were many grey heads, much hugging and a feeling of 'Gosh – we're all still here!' and it felt a bit like a tribute act to the Major/Cameron years.

Those years, though I'm proud of them, are over. Today's challenges are new, and cry out for the flint that Badenoch brings. There may have been a few there who are uncomfortable with that, but the mood was nostalgic rather than mutinous.

She, however, seems to have taken it as the latter. She has reportedly banned anyone in the parliamentary party from having anything to do with Prosper.

Brittle, so brittle. It would have been better to hug them close. Proscribing people with a lifetime's service to her party, as if they were a hostile force, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now Badenoch is requiring all prospective Conservative candidates to sign a pledge to support the party's commitment to abolish the statutory net zero target, and pull out of the European Convention on Human Rights.

When I was adopted as a Tory candidate, there was simply an assumption that one supported (and I did) the broad thrust of Tory policy proposals; there was no item-by-item Spanish Inquisition-style document to be signed in blood. These things can be fudged. The useful term 'rethink' can bear much weight. We and Europe should 'rethink' the ECHR, and Europe probably will anyway. Britain needs 'flexibility' on net zero, a word that doesn't carry any hint, as 'abolish' might, that we're not even bothered about global warming – because, believe me, millions of Tory voters are. Is Badenoch implying that these people should not vote Conservative?

Barwell has argued publicly against rigidity on this, but in every other way spoken supportively about her leadership. There will be other Tory peers who share his instincts. Does she really want to pick a fight with them all?

Mrs T, just like Mrs B, had clear, strong views and could impatiently brush aside colleagues who didn't share them; but she took very great care to assemble a diverse crew, and to keep everybody on board. She understood that letting others have their say was a sign not of weakness, but of confidence. Brittleness doesn't signal confidence. Badenoch's doing so well. She should relax.

SPECTATOR.COM/MATTHEWPARRIS
The debate continues online.

Murky waters

What Ukraine doesn't want you to know about the Nord Stream pipeline

PETER HITCHENS

If you want to start a myth, make it a good one. Look at Odysseus. Imagine if the old liar had come home stony broke, a decade late, and told his wife: 'Sorry, Penny, I got drunk, the ship was repossessed and the crew deserted, I gambled away all my money and I've spent the last ten years working in bars to pay my passage home.' The tale would not have endured. Penelope would probably have kicked him out and married one of the suitors.

It's more or less the same with the unmysterious sabotage of Russia's Nord Stream pipeline in September 2022. There's a perfectly good, prosaic, obvious explanation. The giant undersea tube was able to supply cheap Russian gas to Germany, something the US government has disliked for decades. As long as it was there, Germany might get tired of the New Cold War and nurse its bruised economy instead. The US, using its superb, unique and expensive war technology, blew the pipeline up to prevent this.

Boringly, President Joe Biden specifically promised to do this, in February 2022. He proclaimed, at a White House press conference: 'If Russia invades – that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine again – then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.' One amazed reporter asked how President Biden would do this. With a tiny glint in his eye, Sleepy Joe replied: 'I promise you, we will be able to do it.' Duller still, the era's greatest reporter of US government secrets, from the My Lai massacre to the Abu Ghraib prison disgrace, Seymour Hersh, has lengthily and credibly explained how the US did indeed plant and detonate the enormous bombs needed. But it's no use. It's too tedious and ordinary.

A world hungry for adventure wants to believe that the job was done by a sexy young woman sharing a cramped yacht with a bunch of ultra-masculine romantic Ukrainian boozers, in the middle of a storm. This woman 'looks like a model', is 'young, strikingly beautiful and sometimes clad in glittering dresses', except when she is clad in nothing at all and posing alluringly on the cover of what is politely described as an 'erotic magazine'.

This version of the Nord Stream saga has so far been enthusiastically accepted by the estimable Owen Matthews, writing in these pages, by the distinguished historian Michael Burleigh, writing in the *Literary Review*, by the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* (*WSJ*). That is a pretty sparkling hardcover debut for its author, the North Macedonian *WSJ* journalist Bojan Pancevski. Mr Pancevski is himself gorgeously mysterious, and has an amazing journalistic pedigree. His career took off when he reported the case of the Austrian monster Josef Fritzl, who imprisoned and obscenely abused his daughter. Mr Pancevski later moved on, via the Fifa scandal, to more political stuff. He plainly has excellent sources in Ukraine (the book is surprisingly acerbic about President Volodymyr Zelensky).

A world hungry for adventure wants to believe that the job was done by a sexy young woman

I love the fact that German Wikipedia isn't even sure whether Mr Pancevski was born in 1977 or 1978. What fun to have your date of birth lost in the mists of time before you are 50. When I laughed at his Nord Stream theory on X, he popped up there cheerfully to urge me to read his book *The Nord Stream Conspiracy*. This is (allegedly) 'The Inside Story of the Explosions That Shook the World'. So I did read it. Gosh. My copy is scrawled with exclamation marks. Much of it reminded me of the adventures of Tintin, the Boy Reporter. I kept wishing that Captain Haddock would turn up, perhaps fresh from a meeting of the Society of Sober Sailors. I could scarcely refrain from crying out 'billions of blue blistering barnacles!' as I turned the pages.

'Now for the long, gruelling journey home.'

It would make a great comic strip, with its rock-fisted, brave, terse, incorruptible, principled characters – except that none of these people appears under his or her real name. Nor does the erotic magazine in which the nude model, whose alias is 'Freya', had once featured. Nor does the mysterious institute which employs the ancient expert (Professor Calculus, perhaps?) who explained to our heroes how to blow up a pipeline built of steel more than an inch thick, jacketed in more than four inches of concrete, lying 260 feet below the surface of the chilly, murky and current-infested Baltic. This, by the way, is roughly twice as deep as the supermen of Britain's SBS and the US Navy Seals are normally prepared to dive. As Michael Burleigh says of the pseudonymous diving team, they were 'incredibly brave', which is perhaps true in more ways than one. Mr Pancevski himself notes that when a German flotilla sent submarine drones to the aftermath of the explosion, 'the currents were so strong that the drone operators struggled to reach the seabed around the blast sites'.

The top secret taskforce made many basic blunders – pointlessly caught on a speed camera, using insecure phones and emails, drawing attention to themselves in harbour through slobbish behaviour, using crude fake identities and above all leaving their boat so full of clues (a strand of Freya's hair, some fingerprints, DNA by the ton, even a bloodstain, and some explosive traces). You might almost think they were trying to establish an alibi. But for whom?

Well, it is not for me to say. All my diving has been done in swimming pools, and my experience of erotic models is slender. But I suspect that the Berlin and Washington governments are increasingly worried about German voters, disenchanted with the Ukraine crisis, with their country's growing decrepitude and with the high price of energy. If Nord Stream was blown up by sexy, sassy Freya, rather than by dreary old Uncle Sam, then good relations may last a little longer. Believe what you like. So will I.

Peter Hitchens is a columnist for The Mail on Sunday.

That's the spirit

Sir: What a wonderful young man Michael Simmons is ('Sick of it', 18 July). His stubborn refusal to be held back by disability and illness sets him apart from a generation encouraged to erect mental barriers and create artificial limits. He shows that determination, stoicism and a little bloodymindedness go a long way toward a better life. Our society has improved: we no longer mock disabilities. However, is the kindness culture that discourages growth and aspiration not far crueller in terms of a life well spent?
Ewen Melling
London

Seal their fate

Sir: It would be wonderful if Matt Ridley would add the Atlantic salmon to his list of endangered species whose recovery we should be supporting ('Wild ambitions', 18 July). This species, once a cornerstone of our economy and celebrated nationwide in our culture and tourism marketing, is allowed to decline while, putting aside the seemingly irreversible and unsustainable impact of foreign-owned aquaculture, non-indigenous predators such as grey seals and goosanders are protected and multiplying in such devastating quantities that the wild salmon will soon be extinct in the UK as things stand. There are now more seals around our coastline than wild salmon returning to our rivers.
Julian Pullan
Bramley, Hants

Fisherman's friends

Sir: Following on from Matt Ridley's excellent article, can I draw your readers' attention to the Avon Roach Project? Noticing a catastrophic decline in the Hampshire Avon roach population, two men, Trevor Harrop and Budgie Price (sadly no longer with us) decided to do something about it in 2005. By begging and borrowing and fundraising over many years, with help from the Environment Agency, every year they collected fertilised eggs, brought them on in tanks and then stew ponds, finally releasing three-year-old viable fish into the Avon, thus eventually restoring the roach population. It just shows what dedication, sweat and tears on a relatively small scale can do, and such work should be more widely recognised. Similar work is now being done on the river Kennet by the Reading and District Angling Association.
Ian Campbell
Staines, Middlesex

The return of the native

Sir: Matt Ridley is bang on with his points about rewilding in the UK – one must add the Scottish crossbill to the list of endemic birds. There is an opportunity for some reintroduction of nationally absent species, and I would suggest adding Black Veined and Large Copper butterflies – both former natives – to the list too.
Bob Heddle
Ickham, Kent

Half Python

Sir: The Four Yorkshiremen sketch mentioned by Toby Young (No sacred cows, 18 July) was not a Monty Python creation but in fact first aired on *At Last The 1948 Show*, where the grumbling tykes were played by John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Marty Feldman and Tim Brooke-Taylor.
Bruce Webber
Solihull

Elgin marvels

Sir: I much enjoyed Margaret Mitchell's 'Soul sisters' (18 July) which reminded me of a wonderful encounter with some nuns in the Cairngorms last month. While attending the annual Scalan mass near Tomintoul, I met four of the Dominican sisters of St Cecilia, based at Greyfriars Convent in Elgin, on their way to help at the mass in the mountains. They were singing songs with beautiful, clear voices and their joy was uplifting, their warmth and love of the Eucharist even more inspiring. At the convent, they help in the community and in schools with religious education and offer retreats and sacramental preparation. They invited us to mass the next day and there we witnessed their interaction with children and parishioners, the beaming smiles proof of a life of great worth. The nuns came here in 2013 from Missouri and clearly love their missionary work. We were very lucky.
John Elder
Menmuir, Angus

Baptism at sea

Sir: Commenting on the difficulty of arranging Christian services on Cunard's *Queen Mary 2*, Charles Moore remarks: 'No captain can administer the sacraments' (Notes, 18 July). This is incorrect with regard to baptism. In the 3rd century, a dispute arose between bishops Cyprian of Carthage and Stephen of Rome as to whether those baptised by heretics needed to be re-baptised. Pope Stephen's view prevailed, was endorsed by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and is held throughout Christendom. As long as water is poured and the Trinitarian formula is used ('I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'), anyone, believer or non-believer, can administer the sacrament, even the captain of a luxury liner.
Francis Bown
London E3

Glad patients

Sir: Michael Gove says that 'we can never reduce to net zero the threat from the mentally unbalanced' (Politics, 18 July). No, not net zero, but we might reduce it by having a few more psychiatric hospitals. I worked in these hospitals as an occupational therapist in the 1960s and found that many patients were glad to be there. They had a roof over their heads, meals, activities, and people to monitor their medication. How many people with mental health conditions have their medication monitored by 'care in the community', I wonder?
Pam Hendicott
Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan

Suitable attire

Sir: Rory Sutherland's suggestion (The Wiki Man, 4 July) that it should be acceptable for men to wear shorts in all social settings is so wrong. In hot sun, fair-skinned people should cover up in light-coloured garments: linen or cotton trousers are perfect. Old men showing off their knobbly knees look ridiculous. More importantly, Mr Sutherland should be campaigning for the return of hat-wearing. It is sad to see so many bald or thinning men exposing their shiny scalps to fierce sun – the perfect way to court skin cancer where you won't spot it. Panamas are the perfect solution for English gentlemen.
Andrew Nash
Abingdon, Oxfordshire

Notty issue

Sir: Dot Wordsworth struck a nerve when she discussed the perils of double negatives (18 July). I've lost count of the number of politicians and journalists who get tied in knots here. Just now Fiona Bruce said, when referring to the new Prime Minister visiting the Palace, 'One cannot underestimate what that must feel like', when clearly she meant 'overestimate'. I cannot overemphasise how annoying that is.
Adrian Fogarty
London W4

We have a consignment of Gentleman's Relish, a pot of which will be sent to the writer of the best letter each week. This week's winner is Andrew Nash.

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1. Over the ten years to 31 December 2025, the US dollar NAV per share compound annual growth rate ("CAGR") was 13% and the public market comparator (the FTSE All-World Total Return Index) CAGR was 11%.
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3. HVPE introduced an additional US dollar share price on 10 December 2018; from this date onwards, the actual US dollar share price, as reported by the London Stock Exchange, has been used. Prior to this date, the US dollar share price had been converted from the sterling share price at the prevailing exchange rate.
The share price total return figures have been adjusted for the redemptions which occurred in October 2013 and October 2014.

Seed capital

Iona Bain on the smartest ways to invest for children

'I was gifted a Premium Bond of £1 for my first birthday from my grandma,' says Janice. 'That was in 1970 and I have never won a thing.'

If I had a penny for every time I heard this kind of comment, I'd be a darned sight richer than Janice. She is one of many people I've spoken to since I started reporting on the shocking administrative failures at National Savings & Investments. Around 34,000 families have been unable to trace their loved ones' accounts after their deaths. The total amount owed comes to £367 million.

The scandal prompted NS&I's chief executive, Dax Harkins, to resign and the pensions minister, Torsten Bell, to make a contrite statement in the Commons. Bereaved families have been promised they will be reimbursed and compensated 'where appropriate'.

But this isn't the only way in which Premium Bonds have come up short. Even when folk successfully track down accounts from many moons ago, the amounts they uncover are often a let-down. For every rare winner of the maximum £1 million jackpot, there are thousands of bondholders whose microscopic nest eggs have come to nothing.

It has been a well-intentioned but baffling trend throughout the decades: people buying a tiny number of Premium Bonds on behalf of their children, godchildren or grandchildren in the hope their number will one day come up. Gill, who is now in her sixties, tells me her parents bought £21 of Premium Bonds when she turned 21. 'There has been nothing for 40 years. My mum hoped they would buy me a house.'

Harold Macmillan was clearly a marketing genius. When he was chancellor in 1956, he came up with a neat way to boost government coffers. Revive the National Savings brand and channel the nation's desire for post-war self-improvement into a lottery-based savings product. Throw in a government-backed guarantee and a machine with a cutesy name – ERNIE – to pick the winners each month and hey presto! A savings phenomenon was born.

Today there are more than 23 million Premium Bond holders who have collectively saved £137 billion, much of it on behalf of children under 16. No matter that the odds of winning any prize – let alone a good one – are hard to understand and slimmer than many believe. A £1 Premium Bond bought in 1970 has had a minuscule chance of ever winning a prize of any value.

All right, but what if you save bigger sums on behalf of children? Well, today you need to have at least £4,250 invested in Premium Bonds to have a 90 per cent chance of winning at least one prize per year, but that would almost certainly be just £25, £50 or £100. Indeed, this is what 99 per cent of all prizes are worth.

Let's say you wish to give a financial gift to your godchild and you're considering Premium Bonds. Technically, it has been possible for adults to do this on behalf of children, even if they're not related to them, since 2019. However, the parent or legal guardian would still need to manage the bond until the age of 16, when the child is allowed to decide what to do next.

'There has been nothing for 40 years. My mum hoped the Premium Bonds would buy me a house'

The question is whether this would be a good idea. The traditional advantages cited for bonds look a bit threadbare these days. Prizes may be tax-free but first you need to win one. Your money is directly backed by the government, but this is a red herring since most savings accounts are covered under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme up to £120,000 (far more than the £50,000 bond limit).

The average annual return that NS&I expects to pay out across all Premium Bonds in existence is currently 3.8 per cent. This may seem competitive but it's far from guaranteed, and even if you put in the maximum £50,000 (well done for being the world's most generous godparent), you only have about a 60 to 65 per cent chance of matching or beating the advertised prize fund rate in a typical year.

'We think you should know before it gets serious that our lives are too busy for grandchildren.'

If you really want to give a godchild a leg-up, consider being more ambitious. You could ask the parents if they're willing to set up a Junior Stocks and Shares Isa, with you making the contributions. Returns are tax-free, and while there are no guarantees, global equities have traditionally delivered between 5 and 7 per cent above inflation over long periods.

The maximum that can be put in every year is £9,000. Suppose you invested £50 a month from birth. If the fund averaged 6 per cent growth a year, after 18 years the child would end up with roughly £19,000. At 16, the child can take control, deciding whether to stay in stocks and shares or move into cash, with either the same or a new provider. At 18, they can cash in or transfer into adult accounts of their own.

Another option is a bare trust, which can be set up by anyone on behalf of a child and has no contribution limits. Income and gains are taxed against the child's personal allowances, which can make them tax-efficient, and withdrawals are allowed before the age of 18 so long as they are for the child's benefit (e.g. school fees).

If you want to play things safer, you could always open a children's savings account as a trustee for your godchild – the best accounts right now earn between 3.55 and 5 per cent. And if you really want to take the long view, you could even ask the parents to open a child's pension for you to build up. Of course, you might not get any thanks for a fund they can't access for many decades, and you would run the risk of this becoming a forgotten pension pot after you're long gone.

Finally, if you do invest or save for your godchild, why not embrace having 'The Money Conversation' with them one day? Eventually that dosh will be theirs, and whatever the future looks like – AI oblivion or a booming economic paradise – those who can conserve and grow their cash will always be the winners.

Trade secrets

Can bartering save your business, asks *Tali Fraser*

Holly, a 25-year-old sign writer and muralist, recently spent a couple of days staying in a shepherd's hut an hour from her home. She didn't pay for it – well, not in the way you or I would. The owner had a gypsy caravan with doors that needed painting. Holly could do the job. An agreement was struck, no money changed hands, and both sides walked away feeling they'd got a fair deal.

Holly is one of a growing number of small tradesmen who have quietly decided to opt out of the traditional cash economy – or at least keep one foot outside it. She has been 'paid' in chiropractor sessions, pizza and someone cutting her grass. When she painted the Christmas windows of her local café, the owner told her to pop in for a free lunch 'for the next ten goes'.

The bartering world seems, for some reason, to be dominated by tattooists, happy to exchange their work for an interesting collection of goods. Amira, 22, is trading a tattoo of a budgie skeleton for a set of bird skulls. Lucy, 28, has exchanged tattoos for car repairs – 'I hate spending my money in a garage' – and for stays in Airbnbs. And when Gemma (who goes by Gee Whizz), 45, was refitting her studio last autumn on a tight budget, she put out a call on social media: 'Chances are there's going to be people who've been wanting some tattoo work who can't afford it, but they have these skills to help.' An electrician materialised. So did, more recently, a woman with a printing business, who is getting a cover-up tattoo in exchange for branded mugs and stickers – merchandise Gemma takes to conventions that she 'would usually have to fork out for'.

The artists' barter movement has become somewhat viral on social media, thanks to the story of a Hertfordshire screen printer who swapped a £2,000 original for 30 handmade oak frames and credits the trade with saving his career. Perhaps the barterers are on to something. Artistic work is, as Lucy admits, 'a luxury' and often the first to go when people are feeling the pinch. Bartering could be a way for luxury trades to survive a cost-of-living crisis: the customer keeps her tattoo, the artist keeps her customer, and the one loser is the intermediary taxman who would otherwise have taken a slice.

Running a small business in Britain has become a death by a thousand cuts. Card processors take their percentage; the bank charges you to deposit what's left. 'It's just all these little, tiny ways to chip at what people are managing to earn,' says Holly. 'You can see why so many small businesses just give up.' Many have: the Centre for Retail Research estimated that there were 17,350 shop closures last year. Against that backdrop, bartering looks less hippy-dippy and more like a rational economic choice.

Holly has been 'paid' in chiropractor sessions, pizza and someone cutting her grass

It is part protest too, though. 'Tax is a big part of it,' says Holly. 'You see these massive corporations who don't even pay tax here reaping the benefits of so many things that the country has to offer and giving nothing back. It feels like a bit of a kick in the teeth.' Lucy is blunter: 'I don't want to pay excess fees to the big man. I'd rather just trade something with people on my level, in the working class, and not have to give our money to people who don't need it.' She has views on VAT, too – 'You pay VAT on everything you ever pay for. What's the point of paying that when we can trade with people?' Gemma sees it more politically. She says that we live in a 'neoliberal, capitalist consumer society', but that 'we don't have to buy into it fully'. A lot of societies, she says, were built on reciprocity and we can embrace that again.

There is, however, a snag, and Gemma has half-glimpsed it. If a skills exchange turned out to be taxable, she muses, that 'could obviously be very problematic'. What if someone painted her wall in exchange for a free tattoo 'but because I've done it on my business premises, it's like a business transaction'? She finds the idea 'absolutely mad'.

Sorry to break it to the barterers, but in fact the taxman does not care if you are paid in pounds, pizza or Airbnbs. A barter is valued at what the recipient would have paid in cash, and taxed accordingly. HMRC's VAT guidance offers the example of a garage proprietor who might agree to repair a newsagent's van in return for cancelling last month's newspaper bill. Payment in kind is still payment. According to the HMRC rules: 'You must both account for VAT on each separate supply you make to each other.'

And so the informal economy begins to falter. These small business owners, in a punishing tax system, assumed that a swap between neighbours was nobody's business but their own. The doors of that gypsy caravan may look lovely, but somewhere in Whitehall an official could be trying to assess the market value of a night in a shepherd's hut.

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Lucky dip

Michael Simmons on why stock markets are still so buoyant

'I'm done with Trump,' fumed a normally MAGA-supportive retail trader as he watched an investment that was particularly Hormuz-sensitive collapse. But, perhaps surprisingly, his frustration at the war is not shared more widely by stock pickers.

Despite the geopolitical turmoil of the war in Iran, equities (shares in listed companies) have been on an upward romp for the past year. Since Donald Trump was inaugurated for the second time, the Standard and Poor's 500 index is up 25 per cent. Stock markets almost everywhere have been hitting record high after record high.

It doesn't make much sense. This hasn't been a good year for the world economy. The constant closing and reopening of the Strait of Hormuz sent oil prices skyward. In turn, expectations of resurgent inflation across the globe have pushed bond yields ever higher. Britain has suffered particularly badly thanks to our structural susceptibility to higher prices. But, oddly, equities have seemed immune.

Why? One answer seems to be thanks to retail investors 'buying the dip'. The strategy takes the age-old market maxim of 'buy low, sell high' and turns weakness into opportunity through the – often blind – assumption that the stock will bounce back. When markets are surging and the rise of a stock looks relentless, the day-to-day news cycle or a quarter of underperformance can cause a share price to dip. Traders then look to buy at the bottom of this dip period and unlock maximum profits when, all being well, the price heads north again. The strategy has become particularly popular with retail investors because there's an inherent optimism to it. It almost seems community-minded.

And it's happening more than ever before. According to Citadel Securities, the first half of this year has seen three-and-a-half times the average daily amount of buying on days the S&P has dropped. That's the most buying of the dip since Citadel began tracking. It's even higher than in the GameStop meme-stock frenzy of 2021, when buying the stock of a struggling video-game chain became a viral trend which sent shares up by more than 1,500 per cent in a single month and inflicted ruinous losses on hedge funds that had been shorting the stock.

For the time being, buying the dip seems to broadly work. If the market crashes, it's bouncing back quicker and higher than veteran stock pickers have been used to. When there are market-wide dips, whether it be Covid or the 2022 inflation shock or Trump's 'liberation day' tariff hikes, recoveries have become faster and faster. After the bursting of the dotcom bubble caused the S&P to collapse, it took 1,166 days for the market to return to pre-crash levels. After the Iran war began and markets plunged nearly 10 per cent, the same recovery took just 11 trading sessions.

Trump has played a role in speeding up this process. Before Iran, he had been seen as the stock market's greatest ally. Even once missiles started flying and mines were laid by the Iranians in the strait, traders took comfort in the Taco ('Trump Always Chickens Out') mantra – the idea that when market pressures build enough, the President will back down from whatever action he was taking and markets will rebound. The faith in Taco creates the perfect conditions for dip buying.

The strategy turns weakness into opportunity through the assumption that the stock will bounce back

Buying the dip has become so prevalent that some veteran market-watchers now believe the phenomenon explains, at least in part, why equities have proved so resilient in the face of what should be gale-force headwinds. A close look at the S&P 500 supports this view.

In truth, most stocks have been hamstrung by the war and oil prices, while the huge AI firms and chip-makers have done extremely well (last week's wobble aside).

'All this is going to rattle the markets.'

Retail investors still chase that momentum. And nowhere is momentum – and optimism – directing trading behaviour more than at Elon Musk's SpaceX. After its initial public offering last month, the rocket, AI and satellite firm's market capitalisation passed $2 trillion, compared with revenues of just under $19 billion. That's a price-to-sales ratio of more than 100 – unprecedented in the history of capitalism.

To justify this kind of valuation on traditional revenue ratios, SpaceX would need to be raking in closer to $200 billion a year in revenues. That imbalance is partly responsible for the collapse SpaceX's stock has since experienced. But dip buyers are not fussed and instead see opportunity, as do some hedge funds holding the stock. Musk's ambition is so big that there's a belief he might really justify the hyper-inflated value. But retail investors will need to be prepared to hold a lot steadier than they normally do – true value is probably decades away.

In London, there's hope among some UK-focused funds that our own FTSE has a big boom in its near future too. The government believes that part of a British path to prosperity and growth involves getting Britons into investing. But if it succeeds, most of these new stock market players will not be buying the dip. Instead, they will, sensibly, dip their toe in via fully or semi-managed funds where professionals do the picking for them or simply buy an existing index which tracks a basket of usually well-performing stocks.

One UK-focused fund manager explains to me that this increased use of 'indexation' could reap massive dividends for the FTSE. UK stocks increasingly feature in those tracked by indexes.

The dip-buying phenomenon, when executed correctly, is clearly working for investors, but the pros believe that success will be short-lived. Our new hordes of retail investors have not lived through a prolonged fall in prices and have not really experienced recession. When they do, the surprise could be nasty, as the dip they think they're buying turns out to be just a light reprieve before new depths are plumbed. When that happens, retail investors would do well to remember that old, slightly patronising adage: it's time in the market, not timing the market, that really gets results.

Lean years

Sam McPhail on how fat jabs could wreck pensions

Fat jabs are perhaps the largest development in healthcare since statins. Weight-loss drugs – or GLP-1s, as they're properly known – will reduce the number of people having heart attacks, developing diabetes or getting cancer, and will generally let people live longer. With a population that's two-thirds overweight or obese, it's no surprise that already three million British adults are on the jabs. That's twice as many as last year and the number is expected to double again by the end of 2027, according to consultants at PwC. Reinsurers such as Swiss Re say that weight-loss drugs could decrease all-cause UK mortality by as much as 5 per cent over the next 20 years. A health miracle, then. But one underexplored consequence is: what will it mean for pension providers if more people are unexpectedly living longer?

For those of us on defined contribution schemes, it is not really a problem: we have our pot of money, and that's that. But for defined benefit (DB) schemes, which promise a set return until you die, it is worrying. The question nobody has quite answered is exactly how much that longer life is going to cost and who is going to pay for it. A rule of thumb is that every year of added life expectancy adds around 3 per cent to a DB scheme's liabilities. Insurers have been watching for a while. Jeff Davies, Legal & General's former finance director, said last year that the firm was 'constantly monitoring' the issue, but most big providers feel confident. Claire Altman, Standard Life's head of pension risk, tells me that 'the risk is managed' for 'dramatic improvements in life expectancy'.

Pension trustees, by contrast, have barely started looking. Last month, Standard Life published research saying that seven in ten DB trustees had not considered the effect that weight-loss drugs would have on life expectancy and pension payments, while nine in ten had not assessed how health innovations would affect their schemes' liabilities in general. Although three-quarters of DB schemes are in surplus, it is exactly these surpluses that will start to erode if members live longer than the actuaries predicted. It is not a small market either: bulk annuity deals, where insurers take on scheme longevity risk, ran at nearly £40 billion last year and covered some 330,000 members.

The fiscal consequences of increased life expectancy are already visible in the state system. Last week the Treasury said it will raise the state pension age to 68 by 2037, seven years earlier than currently planned, affecting some five million people. Separately, the OECD told the government that reforming the pensions triple lock is 'necessary to reduce fiscal risks', warning that the triple lock has pushed state pension spending up faster than earnings for years. The Office for Budget Responsibility already thinks that state pension spending will rise from 5 per cent of GDP to 9 per cent by 2075. The government is aware that longevity will affect state pensions, but what about public sector pensions? After all, 92 per cent of people paying into DB schemes are in the public sector, and most of these payments come straight from government spending, so there is no real surplus to erode.

A three-year increase in life expectancy might raise liabilities by as much as £180 billion

Unfunded public sector DB schemes, covering the NHS, teachers, civil servants and the armed forces, are the government's second-largest liability after gilts, and currently stand at £1.4 trillion. Add the extra £550 billion for local government pensions, and the public sector is sitting on close to £2 trillion in DB pension promises. Every one of those promises assumes a certain number of years of payment. Every unexpected extra year of life is a year of payments nobody budgeted for. Therefore, a three-year increase in life expectancy might raise liabilities by as much as £180 billion.

Yet the body responsible for pricing that risk has not really got around to doing the sums. In March, the Government Actuary's Department published a report that named 'new obesity drugs' as one factor that could influence future mortality, alongside Alzheimer's treatments and precision cancer medicine, but it did not model the effect. Neither, it seems, has the OBR. Its most recent public service pensions analysis is focused entirely on earnings growth and inflation assumptions, with no mortality-specific adjustment for GLP-1s at all.

Unfunded schemes currently pay out around £55 billion a year to pensioners, against £49.9 billion in contributions, a gap the Treasury tops up from general taxation. The OBR's own central forecast has that burden easing, falling from 1.9 per cent of GDP now to 1.4 per cent by the early 2070s, but it is an optimistic trajectory that assumes payments keep being outpaced by earnings-linked contributions. It says nothing about what happens if many members simply live longer than the model assumes.

There may, of course, be fiscal upsides too. The benefits of GLP-1s should mean less government spending on cardiovascular and other health conditions linked to obesity. If public sector workers are living longer, they may also work longer. But there is a risk that, for Britain, a thinner waistline will come with a fatter pension bill.

JOHN BROADLEY

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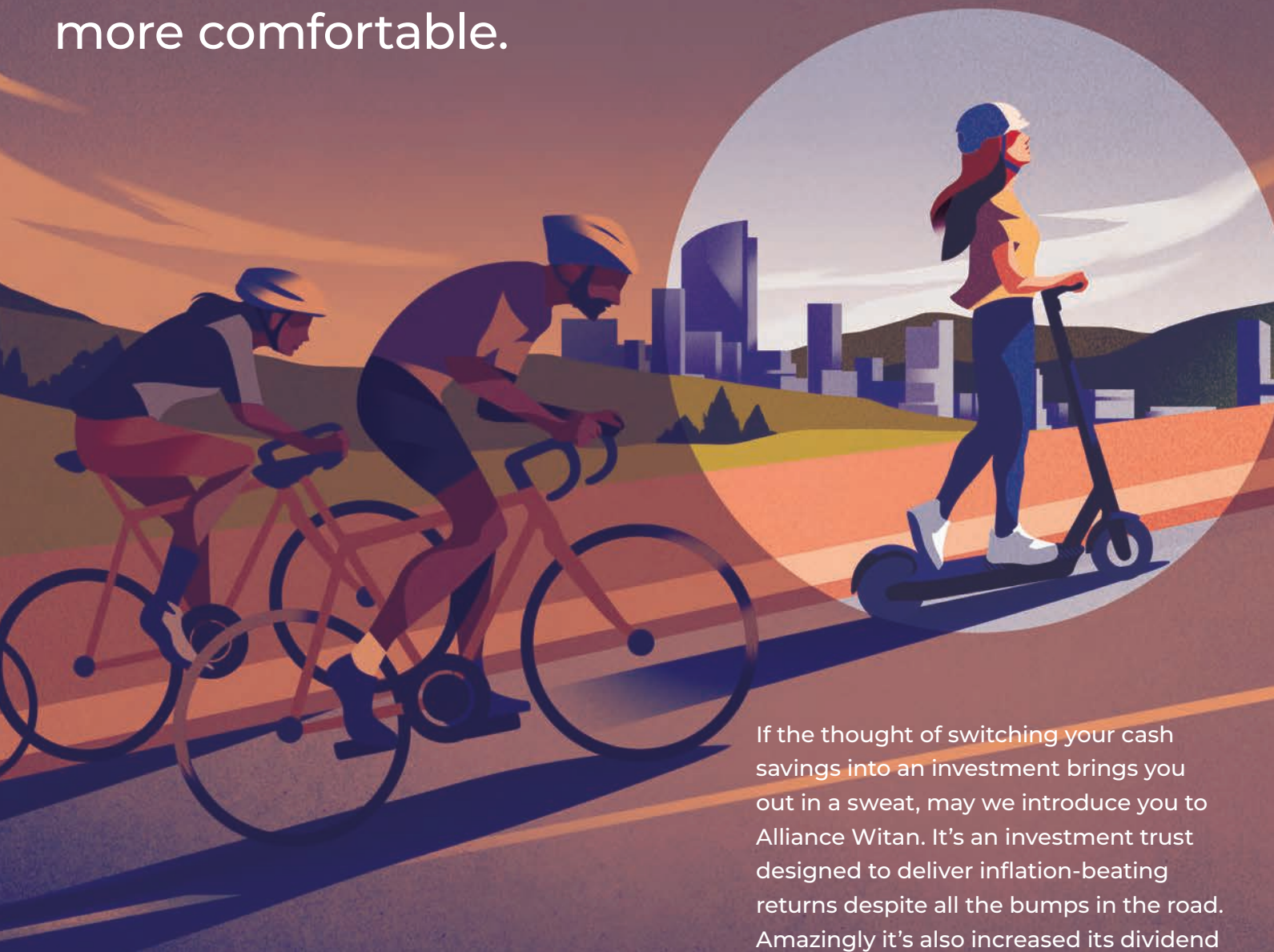

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Volkswagen's fightback: why China's triumph isn't inevitable

The hottest car I ever owned was a 1982 Volkswagen Scirocco GTI in metallic dark green. I once drove it overnight from London to Tuscany with a blind date who never spoke to me again, but that's another story. My point is that VW built my generation's chariots of fire and some of us feel more sadness than schadenfreude at what the *Telegraph* calls 'the downfall of a German giant', as the flagship of its nation's industrial armada contends with multiple impacts of geopolitical and technological change. But I'd say the image of VW 'speeding towards a precipice as the Chinese move in' is more than a touch overhyped. It's a narrative of our era that the West collectively must always challenge.

The VW synopsis is this: along with other German carmakers, the group has suffered a shrinkage of lucrative exports to China, while Chinese EV manufacturers have invaded Europe. Donald Trump's tariffs have whacked US orders and (much less talked about) Putin's war has wrecked sales to Russia. VW employs far too many workers – 650,000 at last count – in too many factories, while the loss of cheap Russian energy has spiked its operating costs.

Now there's talk of halving the model range, cutting 100,000 jobs, closing plants (including the one at Osnabrück that made my Scirocco), possible spin-off of the group's other marques which include Porsche, Lamborghini and Ducati as well as Audi, Seat and Skoda – and even a Chinese takeover of what's left, as happened to Volvo of Sweden and MG in the UK.

Hard to argue with any of that as a scenario of doom, except to say that none of it is new or surprising. VW bosses, led by chief executive Oliver Blume, have long been wrangling with the company's powerful but intransigent unions over the job cuts that inevitably follow from a shift to EVs. A rationalisation of the range likewise makes sense as it focuses on EV conversions of existing internal-combustion model platforms. And the first of those, the ID Polo, launched this month at a starting price below €25,000, has been acclaimed by the motoring media. The Chinese produce cheap EVs with smart batteries, but they're rubbish to drive: the Germans still have a leading edge in engineering. My man in the motor trade – he indeed who sold me the Scirocco long ago – is so confident of revival that he's upped his holding of VW's shares, which have slumped by two-thirds in the past five years. And for confirmation, here's the authentic petrolhead voice of *Top Gear* magazine: '[Volkswagen's] fightback has well and truly begun.'

Can't be worse?

I first met John Healey, the new Chancellor, in 1992 when he was Labour's candidate (and I was campaigning for the incumbent) in the then rock-solid Conservative constituency of Ryedale in North Yorkshire. We all found Healey decent, serious and a gracious loser in a seat he was never going to win, though I recall one Tory toff harrumphing that as an old boy of St Peter's, the public school in York, he also counted as a class traitor. That apart, subsequent encounters confirmed the decency – and his seriousness was underlined by the fact that he sent himself on a year's course at the Royal College of Defence Studies in preparation for the frontbench brief that became his forte.

Nothing in Healey's prior career, in charities and at the TUC, suggests a natural grasp of how private-sector investment and entrepreneurship drive tax-revenue growth and make state spending viable, including bigger defence budgets, while excessive welfare costs wreck every other plan. But I suspect he's serious enough to grasp that in short order. The optimist's mantra for this week has to be: 'Can't be worse than the last lot.'

The new Business Secretary, by contrast, actually is the last lot. Jonathan Reynolds held that job for the first 14 months of the Starmer administration and promised to 'supercharge the economy with pro-business decisions' but did nothing of the kind. Can he be worse second time round? He certainly set himself a very low bar.

Brassed off again

'Nobody knows anything,' said the screenwriter William Goldman. 'Nobody – not now, not ever – knows the least goddamn thing about what is or isn't going to work at the box office.' How right he was, given that the release of Christopher Nolan's film of *The Odyssey* attracted as much attention as the World Cup finals. More significantly, five years after the pandemic, who would have thought box offices would be enjoying a mini-boom while the online streaming services we thought had killed cinema are scrabbling for new subscribers?

US cinema sales are close to 2019 levels. Tim Richards, boss of Vue International which operates 225 multiscreen sites in the UK and Europe, told the *Financial Times* that this summer could be 'the biggest on record'. The Everyman chain, with 49 upmarket UK venues, enjoyed a 23 per cent increase in admissions in the first five months of 2026. Statistics are more mixed at Odeon and Cineworld, and all depend on top-sellers such as *The Devil Wears Prada 2* as well as *The Odyssey*. But the trend suggests the public has revalued the sociable cinema experience as it has tired of the lonesome home screen and its hidden price stings. Netflix, whose shares have almost halved in the past year, is diversifying from on-demand streaming to live events and sports. Anything worth watching on Amazon Prime seems to demand an additional subscription. Apple TV is a rip-off for those who bought it solely to watch *Slow Horses*.

The next risk, we're told, is that the takeover of Warner Bros by Paramount Skydance (which beat Netflix in the bidding) will lead to a reduction in studio output of the ultraviolent epics that tend to put bums on cinema seats everywhere. But here in Burnham's backward-looking Britain, what could be more attuned to the zeitgeist than an evening of mordant anti-Thatcherite northern humour at what we all used to call the pictures: yes, it's time for a blockbuster revival tour of *Brassed Off*.

BOOKS & ARTS

Tom Payne remains in awe of Cicero's powers of persuasion
Lindsay Johns enjoys Colson Whitehead's parting love-letter to Harlem
Bryan Appleyard resolves never to kill another spider
Lloyd Evans catches a superb new J. Edgar Hoover musical that he thinks is destined for Broadway
James Walton learns (yet again) that there's nothing menopausal women can't do
Deborah Ross reviews a Thai film about a horny vacuum cleaner

BETHLEM MUSEUM OF THE MIND. ALEX FOX (ROY FOX FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY)

'Portrait of Richard Dadd', c.1857, by Henry Hering
Hermione Eyre – p40

BOOKS

Small and deadly

Biological warfare is no longer the stuff of science fiction but an all-too-grim reality, says *James Phillips*

Biological War: A Scenario
by Annie Jacobsen
Torva, £22, pp. 416

In the summer of 2020, while the country was between 'waves' of Covid, Dominic Cummings convened a meeting at my urging in Downing Street on pandemic biosecurity. Around the table sat the types of people you would want: scientists, key national security figures and officials. They explained that the thing Cummings was worried about, namely an engineered pathogen, obtained or built cheaply by a small group or even one person, was essentially science fiction. 'You can't beat Darwin,' we were told.

At the end, Cummings turned to me and asked what I thought. I said that much of what had just been declared impossible I had personally seen done in a laboratory five years earlier. Such work was, and is, openly published. Furthermore, President Obama had paused funding 'gain of function' engineering on human-transmissible pathogens back in 2014, after scientists had developed a flu virus to transmit more effectively between ferrets, the standard model for human transmission. In short, not science fiction.

Biological War: A Scenario, by the American journalist Annie Jacobsen, is the briefing we should have received. The author has been writing on the intersection of technology and national security for more than 20 years, and this book is effectively the sequel to her bestselling *Nuclear War: A Scenario*. It follows the same formula, of dozens of interviews with the people who own the nightmare from inside government, extrapolated into a dramatisation of how the nightmare would actually unfold. The interview list is excellent. I spoke to several of the same people five years ago when, at No. 10, we tried and largely failed to convert the Covid tragedy into any serious effort to protect ourselves against something very much worse.

Jacobsen's scenario begins with a lab accident at the Vector Institute in Russia, a known centre of bioweapons research in the past. What escapes is imagined, not real: a 'chimera pathogen', based on plague but combining material from other pathogens, engineered for high airborne transmissibility and pneumonic infection and spreading with an R of 11 (early Covid was 2-3) and an untreated fatality rate near 100 per cent. That's the same mortality rate as natural pneumonic plague. In the grimmest touch, the pathogen is engineered to release a second pathogen when antibiotics are given to treat it. Except that part isn't invented. Jacobsen shows that the Soviets' 'chimera programme', beginning almost 50 years ago, pursued almost exactly this weapon: plague spliced with an encephalitis-causing virus, engineered so that the antibiotics a victim took would trigger the next disease rather than cure it. A weapon that kills by its own victim's hand, a 'booby trap bioweapon'.

The US security state now regards the use of bioweapons as a greater overall threat than nuclear weapons

Jacobsen reports claims that they also tried combining plague with endorphins, so that the infected would go out and socialise: high lethality and high spread. She details the extraordinary chain of events when British Intelligence first discovered, through defectors at the end of the Cold War, how the Soviets had pursued such programmes at scale. She also reveals that al Qaeda explored biological weapons on their own; and she outlines how the US state department publicly declares that it believes multiple hostile nations are continuing related lines of work, and how the prospect of their deployment, either deliberately or accidentally, is regarded by the US security state as a greater overall threat than nuclear weapons, given use likelihood. She does an important service in raising the salience of this.

The book's fictional plague is an update to what could be happening with such programmes now. We see deaths begin and spread in the town by the lab, following the accident. The circumstances, Jacobsen dryly notes, point to an obvious conclusion: a lab leak. They also point to a familiar one. In her scenario, the Russians blame a wet market selling contaminated meat, and every early case is duly linked to it. This is, she says, 'a wink and a nod'. Her view is that what she calls the 'Covid origins fiasco' did lasting damage to public trust in scientific institutions, from which they have not begun to recover. It also greatly impeded efforts to prevent a repeat. The point of the scenario is not to relitigate 2020 but partly to show what happens when a state has already spent its credibility before the crisis begins.

This effect of biowarfare was not lost on those in the Soviet bioweapon programme. A threat of this kind weaponises a free society against itself. The very act of free assembly amplifies the spread. Jacobsen follows the conclusions of the American security apparatus's biological war-gaming exercises. We watch how the seeds of distrust from Covid and broader politics combine with such a disease to trigger a descent into anarchy and state collapse.

Does it work as a book? Mostly, and it certainly reads as a page-turning thriller. I finished it in two sittings. It is at its best when it seamlessly weaves its scenario with much critical history too little known to the public. This includes the massive proliferation globally of the highest containment level bioresearch facilities (BSL3&4) which house such pathogens, usually located in or near urban centres, and how such pandemic pathogen 'gain of function' research, sometimes functionally indistinguishable from bioweapons research, became normalised as part of 'biodefence' after the 2001 anthrax attacks on America's East Coast. The 2012 quote by Anthony Fauci, the former chief medical adviser to the US president, is included: 'The benefits of such [gain of function] experiments and the resulting knowledge outweigh the risks.'

Readers will naturally ponder whether this view needs revising. However, as with *Nuclear War: A Scenario*, sometimes the thrillerisation goes too far and is a little too breathless. The horror of plague death is described, then described again, and then again, at every rung of the exponential

JUNG YEON-JE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Soldiers from the US Army base in Dongducheon, north of Seoul, during a joint military exercise with South Korea in 2011, aimed to simulate the detection and disposal of North Korea's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons

ladder. An entire page is devoted to explaining that an F-16 fighter jet is a technological marvel but completely useless against plague – a point which most readers will have grasped by the second sentence.

Specialists may also quibble with the particulars, and the lack of caveats: the speed and certainty of collapse, the inability to contain with lockdown, the mechanics of state distrust, and, for reasons best left unsaid, the plausibility of the precise engineered pathogen setup and characteristics invoked. (This may have been a deliberate decision on Jacobsen's part for security reasons.) But let them quibble. It misses the deeper alarm, which is not about this precise scenario at all.

Jacobsen's chimera is an update of a known Soviet programme whose tools go back half a century. In the past 20 years, the tools for engineering biology, such as gene editing, directed evolution and now AI, have become not merely more powerful but vastly cheaper and easier. Making a protein that seeks out and destroys a cancer cell is, in its essentials, a similar skill to making a viral protein adhere more tightly to the lining of a human nose. That is what 'dual use' means.

This is the twist in the tale at the very end. In the Acknowledgements, Jacobsen writes that, through her interviews, she realised that worse scenarios were possible.

Bioweapon creation is one thing you definitely do not want democratised

Bioweapon research is democratising, and bioweapon creation is one thing you definitely do not want democratised. This technological trajectory is the part that the briefers in 2020 had not absorbed, and I suspect most readers have not either.

Here John von Neumann is unavoidable. The mathematician and physicist titled a 1955 essay of his with a question: 'Can We Survive Technology?' He argued that the 'effectiveness of offensive weapons is such as to stultify all plausible defensive time scales', with his own Manhattan Project research heavily influencing his thinking. But consider his question in a form he did not have to face. If a person could create an atomic bomb in a basement from raw materials readily available, a nuclear weapon as easy as an IED, could civilisation continue to exist at all? Mercifully, uranium enrichment is hard. However, von Neumann did not foresee biological weapons. The uncomfortable possibility, which the MIT synthetic biologist and gene drive inventor Kevin Esvelt has spent years warning about, detailed in a paper Whitehall ought to read, is that biology imposes no such convenient constraint in 'a future in which thousands can release new pandemics' – as the paper is subtitled. The warning is about the direction of travel, not the present state: building such a weapon still demands skill and resources beyond a lone amateur. However, that margin of safety is precisely what is eroding.

To her credit, Jacobsen does not dramatise those scenarios in detail. The material is an information hazard. You do not want to inspire a biological Unabomber in the course of warning about him. But this leaves people such as Jacobsen, who want to alert us to dangerous possibilities, in a bind: making the case loudly enough to be heard and in sufficient detail to be credible raises the very risk they are trying to reduce. Jacobsen's nation-state lab scenario is a floor, not a ceiling.

Which is why the book's central outcome matters more than any debate about its scenario's precise plausibility. As I and others have argued, biodefence is primarily a national security problem, not a public health one. Covid showed our looming vulnerability to nuclear-risk-scale weapons from rogue states, terrorists and lone actors.

Britain has refreshed its Biological Security Strategy with a claimed headline £1.5 billion a year, spread across topics varying from bee health to pandemics. However, the Centre for Long-Term Resilience, which helped shape the strategy, has rightly questioned whether this is actually new money at all post-Covid, while key safeguards, such as the screening of synthetic DNA orders, remain voluntary. But what has commanded most attention, resources and time is a lawyer-run inquiry. This is akin to investigating the Challenger disaster by convening barristers to adjudicate the tone of the control room rather than hiring Richard Feynman to find the failed O-ring.

Read this book. It is a better briefing on the problem than the one we received in Downing Street six years ago – and that is not just a compliment to Jacobsen but more an indictment of us.

James Phillips was a special adviser to the Prime Minister for Science and Technology from April 2020 to September 2022 and a lead author on the biosecurity section of the 2024 Blair-Hague report on Biotechnology.

DEA/A.DAGLIA ORTI/DE AGOSTINI/VIA GETTY IMAGES

Bust of Cicero, 1st century BC, discovered in Sabbioneta, Italy

The power of persuasion

Tom Payne

Orator: The Life of Cicero and the End of the Roman Republic
by Catharine Edwards
Hutchinson Heinemann, £30, pp. 450

How should we think about Cicero? He was the orator who claimed that he did his best to save the Roman Republic from decadence. To more recent readers, he has come to seem regressive as well as ridiculous: he opposed the redistribution of land and loathed the idea of doling out grain rations. But it's his self-promotion that makes us roll our eyes. Early in her biography, Catharine Edwards understates the obvious: 'False modesty was never Cicero's problem.'

What she does best throughout her surprisingly page-turning account is to reveal Cicero through his own words. (Admittedly, she has many, many words to choose from.) She quotes him reflecting on an early, junior role as a *quaestor* in Sicily: 'What Sicilian *quaestor* has won greater renown or popularity?' She doesn't quote what he says next, which is a story he tells about how nobody remembers his stint in Sicily. It's true that Cicero was an ardent self-promoter, who thought he had not so much rescued Rome as re-established it. But we have to ask, first, by today's standards, was he really more precious about his legacy and his ego than today's leaders? And, next, what if he was right?

His boast was to have defended the republic wearing a toga. That is to say, his achievements in oratory and statecraft were equivalent to the military successes of generals. He said this after his term as consul – one of the two heads of government – in 63 BC, when his scathing rhetoric and efficient spy network scotched a conspiracy to overthrow the state. Still, as with his 'best *quaestor* ever' brag, we need context. He was constantly defending himself because he had to. In this case, he was shoring up his reputation against those, including Julius Caesar, who argued that he had presided over the execution of key conspirators without a trial. Up there with blocking land reform etc., to later ages this counts as a Bad Thing.

But can good speeches lead to bad things? Edwards's book is called *Orator*, and in her introduction she writes: 'Cicero did all he could to solve Rome's problems through negotiation and persuasion rather than violent conflict.' 'All he could' is revealing. It suggests not only that there were limits to what a speech could achieve in those turbulent times, but also that Cicero could go beyond those fine speeches if he had to. The executions of 63 were one example. There were others, and, by mustering all the available sources and arranging them into a pacy narrative, Edwards brilliantly presents the much neglected Cicero, Man of Action.

Cicero had a genius for getting people to act against their own interests

This is especially true of the events following Caesar's assassination. If you know the period through Caesar-centric tellings, such as Plutarch or Shakespeare or HBO, you'll be amazed at how exciting it was from Cicero's point of view, at least when Edwards handles it. Caesar does bestride the back end of the book, but less like a colossus than we might expect. (Edwards deftly reduces his big moment to a sub-clause: 'Crossing the river Rubicon, he entered Italy proper around 10 January.' That's all we hear about the geographical feature-turned-metaphor.) The times Caesar calls on Cicero are vivid and even funny. After Cicero has to entertain the upstart general and his huge entourage, we hear him confide to his friend Atticus: 'My guest was not the kind of person to whom one says: "Do come again when you are next in the neighbourhood."'

Cicero regretted that he hadn't been party to Caesar's assassination, even though he was in his early sixties when the knives went in. He wrote to Cassius: 'I wish you'd invited me to the Ides of March dinner: there'd have been no leftovers.' Those leftovers included Mark Antony, who mobilised crowds and legions against the murderers. Reading Edwards's account brings home how close Cicero came to defeating Antony – yes, with his fearless rhetoric, but more by steeling the senate for the fight and even by joining Brutus's forces in Macedonia. Some think his speeches against Antony – the *Philippics* – were the acts of a doomed man, perhaps stung by those who wondered why he hadn't gallantly taken his own life yet. But here the reader can believe for a moment that Cicero had a real chance of isolating Antony and winning a campaign that could have prevented autocracy.

In the event, he lost. Antony and Octavian put him on a list for bounty-hunters (called a proscription). He was trying to escape in a litter when his murderers found him, and he exposed his neck for them. Antony put Cicero's writing hand and his severed head on the speakers' platform in the forum; his wife, Fulvia, had prised the head open and run her hairpins through the tongue.

This conveyed something Cicero had already lamented: that the power of rhetoric was already dead, at least in Rome. We're often told how Cicero believed that good men made good speakers. But here we see enough of his speechifying in context to realise how practical it was. The author sometimes shows us Cicero arguing a case, and then indicates how he'd argue the reverse later in life, or defend people who had once opposed him. She reveals his genius for getting people to act against their own interests. How do you persuade the people's assembly to vote against populist politicians? Convince them they'll have to leave beautiful Rome. How do you persuade buyable senators to condemn a corrupt defendant? Tell them their reputation is at stake. How do you persuade supporters of the late Caesar to hate Antony? Convince them he's betraying Caesar's ideals.

This may sound unctuous, even nauseating; but even as a philosopher, Cicero spent his life making ideals workable. One of those ideals was a harmonious state, based on the checks and balances that the repub-

lic had developed. As Edwards says from the start:

> At a time when contemporary political structures feel increasingly under pressure, when questions about the place of persuasion and appeals to the popular will in politics are especially pressing, Cicero's life and times – and his extraordinarily varied writings – have perhaps never seemed more relevant.

It is in keeping with Cicero's quizzical, sceptical cast of mind, and his ability to see situations from all sides, that Edwards leaves us to answer those questions.

A rebel at heart

Elisa Segrave

These Wild English: A Family, a Class, a Country on Fire
by Nicola Wilding
Profile Books, £20, pp. 320

Nicola Wilding is a documentary film producer, whose family was originally rural working class. Aged 60, her mother, Sandra, prompted by the hacking to death of the soldier Lee Rigby, unexpectedly joined the English Defence League (EDL) and went on marches headed by Tommy Robinson. During a series of disappointing liaisons with men, including two marriages, she had brought up four children, lived in two different countries, moved often within the UK, got into debt, worked in several low-paid jobs, including one at an Omagh army camp pub, and, despite early heart trouble, ended up as a dedicated employee in care homes throughout Covid. She told her daughter she'd got tired of 'the bloody lefty media' which only told one side of a story.

In *These Wild English*, Wilding sets out to examine her mother's life: 'Home for my grandparents was a place called the Eden Valley, in the old county of Westmorland.' Grandad was a labourer for a tenant farmer named 'Slackie', who rented land off 'a wealthy big-house family'. Nana was a Catholic, whose father had come from Northern Ireland to work in the Whitehaven mines. After a stint in domestic service, Nana had married young, and in 12 years raised seven children in a tiny labourer's cottage, then at Ash Hill farmhouse, where Grandad still looked after the livestock and crops. Sandra, the second-born, spent much of her childhood and teenage years caring for her younger siblings, since Nana would often disappear, eventually leaving them all for good.

Wilding seamlessly weaves hard historical facts into the narrative with vivid portraits of family members. She notes that before the Enclosure Acts – a series of laws between 1750 and 1850 privatising land – her grandfather, instead of working for a tenant farmer, would have owned three acres and a cow. She shows how Margaret Thatcher's policy of encouraging people to buy their council houses could put them into crippling debt, as happened to her mother. 'I remember thinking as a 12-year-old, "OK we've bought our house but it isn't actually our house".'

Wilding is disgusted by Labour's incompetence over Foot and Mouth in 2001 – 'the horror that killed six million animals and cost £3 billion'. Her brother, Michael, who'd taken over running the farm when Grandad died in 1982, had to witness the last 40 cows loaded up to be killed. Foot and Mouth never even reached Ash Hill. But she gives credit where it's due:

> The House of Lords doubled down its scrutiny. There were peers who knew about and cared deeply for farming, and recognised a cock-up when it was happening. 'It is not acceptable,' the Countess of Mar stated, 'that those who have cared all their lives for cows, sheep, pigs or goats that have had to be slaughtered must endure the sight of those animals' bodies abandoned... in the fields that they used to graze.' Michael went to a flat in Penrith, a turnip tattoo his only memento of years on the farm.

Animals are important. There's a wonderful vignette of Grandad winning yet again at the Penrith show with his Hereford bull. Rex, the family dog, saved the life of Wilding's uncle when he was a toddler by barking as he struggled in the sheep dip. As a girl, Sandra loved her father's mare, Beauty, riding her to escape the household drudgery that worsened after Nana scarpered and was replaced by a lazy stepmother. She taught Beauty to jump, as she demonstrated proudly to her father. But he was disappointed when she ducked out of grammar school, leaving at 15. Later she defied him again, getting an early skinhead haircut and going wild in Blackpool.

Aged 60, Wilding's mother unexpectedly joined the EDL and went marching with Tommy Robinson

She showed the same reckless courage when she arrived in Omagh as an army wife. Driving towards the camp, she was followed by young men who, spotting her British number plate, yelled threats and abuse. She replied: 'Aren't you the big men mouthing off at a lone woman? Aren't you the fucking heroes?' 'She had absolutely no fear,' Wilding writes, 'only disgust and rage.'

Years later, Sandra expressed similar rage marching with the EDL in Dover, arguing with 'a pink-haired anti-fascist called George' distributing 'STOP THE NAZI RALLY' leaflets. She explained that she was marching 'in support of Calais truckers being attacked by migrants trying to board their trucks'. (A refugee was living in her spare room.) Everyone, especially those who readily dismiss people who display the St George's flag or who voted Brexit, should read this defiant, lively, terrific book.

Tokyo drift

David Vernon

Schoolgirl
by Osamu Dazai, translated by Polly Barton
Penguin Classics, £9.99, pp. 160

In June 1948, the writer Osamu Dazai and his last love, Tomie Yamazaki, drowned themselves in the Tamagawa Aqueduct near Tokyo. It was a murky ending to a life which had begun in wealth and social status but which rapidly descended into alcoholism, depression, impoverishment – and literary genius.

During his short life – he died at 38 – Dazai produced a substantial body of work: novels and stories which helped define Japanese literature of the 1930s and 1940s and which are enjoying a significant global reputation now. Often autobiographical in nature, playing games with the blurred borders between reality and illusion, they chart disordered, chaotic lives, exploring isolation, poverty and debauchery with a sly wit and brutal honesty. *No Longer Human*, published shortly after Dazai's death, is still his most celebrated work: a disturbing study of human alienation told with tortured jocularity.

This collection of six stories, written on the eve of, or during, the second world war, maintains the persistent theme of estrangement, while also dissecting concepts of patriotism and nationalism and scrutinising attitudes to Japanese identity and social conformity. In the titular story, from 1939, which shot its author to stardom and a place among the literary elite, Dazai transfers his own existential crises into the life of a Tokyo schoolgirl. She candidly relates her mundane day to us – waking, bathing, reading, taking the bus – but her narrative veers off on dark tangents that reveal her resentments, anxieties and frustrations, which are both ordinarily adolescent and chillingly suggestive of wider problems. It is a brilliant piece, Dazai's own life skilfully relocated into another to explore universal questions of individuality and Japan's own particular sociopolitical complexity as war loomed.

The other stories are no less powerful, including one featuring a woman who leaves her artist husband because of his obsessive ambition (which might be read as an allegory of Japanese militarist determination). In another, a woman waits on a station platform, and her concerns about the war metamorphose into more profound issues of existential dread, Dazai exploiting to the hilt the intensity and ambiguity of the short story form to leave us in a state of deep unease.

All the stories have been wonderfully translated by Polly Barton, who perfectly captures Dazai's curious rhythms and idiomatic language, drawing us into the characters' angst-ridden souls and their alarming confessions.

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Femme fatale: the dancer Liane de Pougy, appearing as a seductive spider luring men to their deaths in the Folies Bergère production of 'L'Araignée d'Or'. Lithograph by Paul Berthon, 1896

Along came a spider

Bryan Appleyard

Arachnomania: Spiders and the Cultural Work They Do for Us
by Maria Tatar
Princeton University Press, £20, pp. 288

I had not thought much about spiders until I read Maria Tatar's *Arachnomania*; now I can think of little else. I even watched a film mentioned in the book – *Eight-Legged Freaks*. It was awful, though it did bring home how very scared people can be of spiders, especially large ones. But, as Tatar shows, spiders are also part of human history and culture; and they really are different. I use fly sprays to get rid of insect intruders. I would never now use them against arachnids as well.

Tatar was first drawn to spiders by the Covid pandemic which locked us all down. It was then she discovered that the eight-legged freaks offered the possibility of 'finding a model for survival and creativity in times of seclusion, darkness and gloom'. They are, as we shall see, paragons of survival.

The author is an 81-year-old American academic, born in Germany. Her learning is formidable and at times weird. She notes that, like spiders, we make webs – notably the World Wide Web, which showed us how to 'transform our own solitary havens into hives of productive activity'. Like us, spiders are busy creatures; they are also creative, especially when it comes to webs. And they are worldwide.

Their webs are astoundingly complex, tough creations that trap their food. The world's spiders apparently eat 400-800 million tons of insects a year. But it is the process of weaving their webs that captures the human imagination. They draw luminous threads from their bodies and, for Tatar, this is 'what it is to be an artist in the idealised form, that for centuries dominated our thinking about creativity'.

Darwin was thrilled by the spiders he saw on his world voyage and sent a box full of them back to Cambridge

Spinning is also a primeval human craft. It is traditionally the work of women, and the Spider Woman appears in ancient stories as well as modern books and films. In *Dr. No*, James Bond cannot cope with spiders. He 'breaks into a sweat when we see him struggling to keep control when a tarantula crawls up his arm'. I'm with 007 there – big, hairy, monstrous tarantulas are all that's worst about arachnids.

J.R.R. Tolkien seems to have agreed when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. He said that spiders were 'the particular terror of northern imaginations', and, to demonstrate, he created the nightmarish female spider Shelob. *The Black Spider*, a German novel published in 1842, was rediscovered by the Nazis, who decided that the book was about the lives of rural folk and demonstrated their ability to defend their country against foreign invaders.

This is not simply a western fascination. We are told: 'In Borneo, some tribes revere a spider that spins a huge web over the world and uses insect larvae to feed a tree that produces human beings from its leaves.' Spiders are recruited to sustain many mythologies and religions.

By now you may be wondering what on earth this book is about. Spiders, of course – but there is much more to it than that. In one sense it is a brilliant cultural creation of a world wide web that really does connect us all. For example, three new species of spiders were found in Brazil in 2023. Their discoverers called them Kirk, Spock and McCoy, characters from the TV series *Star Trek*. Culturally we are one with the arachnids.

In another sense, it is a celebration of scientific genius. Charles Darwin is one of Tatar's heroes. He was thrilled by the spiders he saw on his voyage around the world on *HMS Beagle* and sent a box full of them back to Cambridge. They had to be seen to be believed. E.B. White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, clearly shared Darwin's fascination, writing: 'Once you begin watching spiders, you haven't time for much else... The world is really loaded with them.'

But I think *Arachnomania* is really about what it is to make a work of art and experience joy in the process. Tatar, in old age, is pulling together all her disciplines – folklore, German literature and mythology – in an attempt to form a perfect expression of herself. Towards the end, she quotes George Eliot in *Middlemarch*: 'It is of no use to try and take care of all the world; that is being taken care of when you feel delight – in art or anything else.' Those words, Tatar says, are relevant, because her spider book brought her 'a form of delight that is not just ephemeral'. This makes perfect sense. *Arachnomania* is a slow read, but it is well worth it.

Harlem hustle

Lindsay Johns

Cool Machine
by Colson Whitehead
Fleet, £22, pp. 368

Cool Machine, the final novel in Colson Whitehead's Harlem trilogy (following *Harlem Shuffle* and *Crook Manifesto*), is another tour de force and a fitting conclusion to the Uptown peregrinations of his endearing protagonist Ray Carney, a successful Harlem furniture salesman and part-time fence.

It's an old-school crime caper, set in 1980s New York against the backdrop of Mayor Koch's rapidly gentrifying city, told in three interconnected sections excoriating Reagan-era capitalism. The ubiquitous construction works, graffiti and corruption are fuelled by the twin deities of power and money.

Each story is stylish, powerful and poetic – whether featuring the Harlem criminal mastermind Uncle Rich, attempting to steal Jesse Owens's Olympic medal from the Waldorf-Astoria; or Ray's ageing friend Pepper, hoping to procure a stolen African tribal mask for the businessman he is guarding; or Ray himself, trying to protect his dead cousin Freddie's son from the mafia.

New York is depicted with panache as a maelstrom of moral turpitude and Darwinian competition, split by long-standing racial fissures. Whitehead's evocation of the black demi-monde, with its skulduggery, malevo-

lence and violence, filled with louche characters who 'emanate a palpable depravity', is thrilling. There is also sardonic humour: 'But Carney was not without resources. He grew up in Harlem, which was its own school, and learned one skill early on. When the shooting starts: duck.'

Cool Machine is a love-letter to both Harlem and the whole protean metropolis, even if it is unforgiving: 'It was an expensive city – but cutting dreams and ambitions down to size was on the house.' Philosophical ruminations on transience and mutability also abound. Of Harlem's 125th Street we are told: 'The only permanent tenants were hustle and impermanence.'

Whitehead is a worthy successor to his literary forebears Chester Himes and Walter Mosley. While Carney is admittedly no Coffin Ed Johnson, Gravedigger Jones or Easy Rawlins, the duality of his psyche, his erratic moral compass and his psychological complexity make for an emotionally fulfilling read.

With echoes of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and the blaxploitation movie *Shaft*, *Cool Machine* showcases a novelist at the height of his craft, working with cerebral glee, virtuosity and an abundance of love. Whitehead's Harlem trilogy deserves to become a touchstone of the modern American literary canon.

On the rocks

Alex Peake-Tomkinson

All In
by Claire Powell
Chatto & Windus, £16.99, pp. 320

Claire Powell's first novel, *At the Table* (2022), delineated a year in the life of the Maguire family from south London – a separating couple and their adult children – with each chapter revolving around a meal. This was done so cleverly that not only did it not seem gimmicky, it was not even immediately obvious. The book won many plaudits, including from Philip Hensher and Marian Keyes. *All In* is even better.

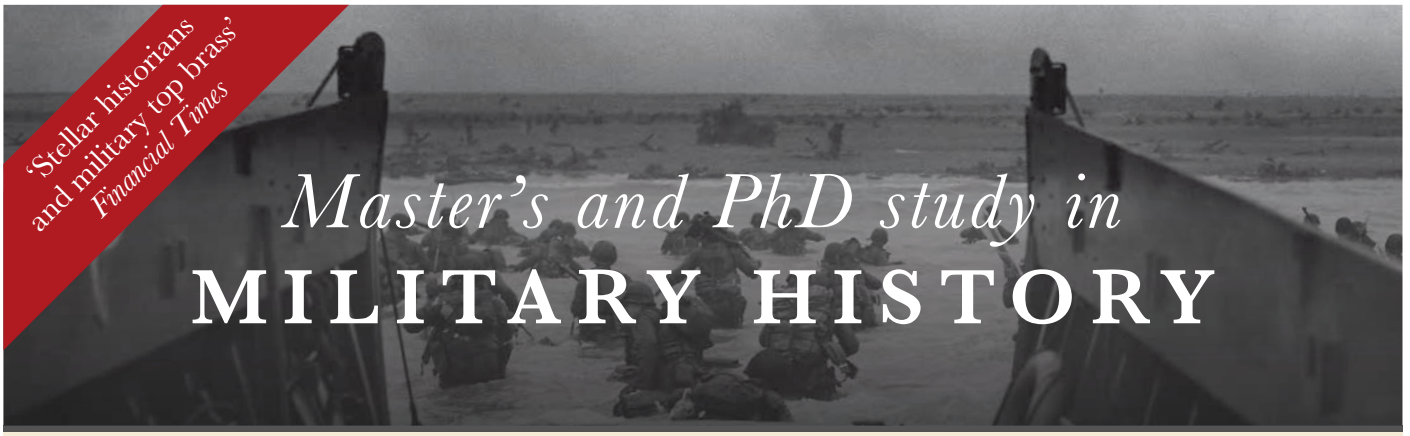
Jo and Dave are about to go on a trip with Dave's investment broker brother, Teddy, Teddy's girlfriend, Kayla, and Dave and Teddy's father, Alan. The brothers' mother, Val, has recently died. The holiday has been paid for by Teddy, much to Dave's discomfort.

Jo and Dave's marriage is at crisis point after a round of unsuccessful IVF, and she is haunted by the insistent refrain: 'It's over.' She watches Dave as he waters plants one evening with noise-cancelling earphones on: 'At one time in her life it might've intrigued Jo to know what was going on in Dave's mind. She was quite jealous at the beginning, always fearful he fancied someone else, that he might leave her for a colleague or an ex. Now – 19 years in – she found she didn't care.'

Powell is like an anthropologist, pinpointing details so that we know the precise milieu that Jo (a nurse) and Dave (a council employee) inhabit. When she yawns, a glint of metal fillings in her molars is on display; her holiday shoes are a 'silver Birkenstock Arizona dupe'. He has a Charlton Athletic tattoo on his calf, which he affects not to regret. I winced as he offered to buy a round at the airport, a move which soon escalates.

It occurred to me how rarely we encounter lower-middle-class couples as protagonists in literary fiction without them being caricatured – and frankly how weird that is, when these people make up a huge part of British society. Powell refuses to condemn any of her characters, and I was rather moved when, for example, irritable Alan unexpectedly speaks of how the last years of his marriage were the happiest.

All In is principally a superior beach read with a propulsive plot; but Powell is also doing something quietly political by placing Jo and Dave centre stage and showing us the complexity and richness of these so-called ordinary lives.



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TATE

'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke', 1855-64, by Richard Dadd

ARTS

Dadd dancing

Hermione Eyre on the Victorian Hieronymus Bosch

No one paints fairyland like Richard Dadd (1817-86). In 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke', 1855-64, he reveals a teeming congregation of tiny folk, summoned by a dragonfly trumpeter, marshalled by a pompous chamberlain no bigger than a daisy, all gathered in the presence of Merlin (dead centre) to witness a macho fairy break a hazelnut with an axe. The shell will serve, of course, as Queen Mab's chariot.

And yet the scene isn't cute. By placing the shiny bald pate of a frightened gnome a jot too close to the swing of the axe, the artist suggests the fairy feller might break that nut instead. Dadd is like a Victorian Hieronymus Bosch.

The fabled painting was donated to the Tate by Siegfried Sassoon in 1963 in memory of his friend Julian Dadd, the painter's great-nephew, and his two brothers, all killed in the Great War. It also went on to inspire a song by Freddie Mercury.

I eagerly signed up for the press preview for Dadd's forthcoming Royal Academy show, then looked twice at the address. It was the Bethlem Royal Hospital in East Croydon, a working psychiatric hospital, the modern incarnation of Bedlam, which relocated to suburban south London in the 1930s. I discovered it to be a spacious, welcoming campus. Alongside secure areas, there's a café, a gallery and the Museum of the Mind, which holds the Dadd archive.

Dadd murdered his father during a psychotic episode in 1843, and was committed to permanent custody without trial. For 42 years, Bethlem and Broadmoor were his prison, home and studio, and the wardens his substitute family, who often cherished his work. The compassion with which he was treated gives one hope.

At Bethlem Hospital I met the infinitely patient, clever Nicholas Tromans, a working NHS probation officer, Victorian art scholar and Dadd specialist, author of *The Artist and the Asylum* (2012). There could scarcely be a better qualified person to curate this landmark survey, which engages frankly with the psychiatric background.

'Dadd used to be considered an outsider artist, but he was the opposite,' says Tromans. His father was a gilder of frames for artists based on Suffolk Street, off Pall Mall, and David Roberts, the painter of grand Egyptian panoramas, was a family friend. Dadd became a prize-winning student at the Royal Academy, with the best record of attendance. His friendship group, 'The Clique', included Augustus Egg and William Powell Frith. Dadd made high-flown paintings of scenes from Shakespeare: a goggle-eyed Hamlet who can see his father's ghost; Ariel's mob footing it featly in 'Come Unto These Yellow Sands' (1842). They were praised in the press as both sublime and silly; Dadd was already a brilliant but, as Tromans puts it, 'unstable compound'.

Hereditary schizophrenia is often brought on in the late teens and early twenties by a period of stress. Dadd signed up to work as the official artist on a thrilling but very intense journey, a Grand Tour that extended into the Holy Land, Egypt and Syria, led by Sir Thomas Phillips, lawyer and former mayor of Newport. There was little time for Dadd to record the endlessly stimulating scenery. 'All seemed to slip away from me as if unreal,' he wrote to Roberts, 'and yet I do not think that I am much to be blamed, for a body can't very well sketch riding on horseback.'

For 42 years, Bethlem and Broadmoor were Dadd's prison, home and studio

He drew many beautiful, jumbled impressions, often unsure where he was. At first his companions thought he had sunstroke. In the Vatican, he told them he had seen the Devil inspecting the pictures, in the form of an old lady wearing lavender silk. His later painting, based on memories of the trip, 'The Artist's Halt in the Desert' (*c.*1845), shows clouds above the travellers drifting into the form of a bearded magus. Dadd alienated Sir Thomas by praising paganism over Christianity. On return to London in 1843 he was noticeably mentally unwell, but working hard on the paintings he owed Sir Thomas, with results Frith described as 'sluggish'.

That summer he watched the stars for a sign, and then committed his terrible crime, stabbing his father in a premeditated attack while they walked side by side in Cobham Park in Kent. Asylum notes from 1877 describe how Dadd then posed '(with upstretched arm), thus apostrophised the starry bodies, "Go," said he, "and tell the great god Osiris that I have done the deed which is to set him free."'

Apprehended on the run in France after nearly stabbing a passenger on a train, he was extradited home. In the criminal wing of Bethlem – a building that is now the Imperial War Museum – he was allowed to paint using materials his family sent him. No notes were kept on him for his first ten years of incarceration. 'Then Bethlem was put in special measures,' notes Tromans, 'and a new resident superintendent physician arrived, Dr William Charles Hood.' Hood was an active reformer, dividing those who had committed crimes prior to becoming unwell from those whose crimes were a result of illness, such as Dadd. Hood granted Dadd access to books and periodicals so he could keep up to date on art, decorated the asylum's walls with prints and sculptures, and reignited Dadd's interest in Shakespeare. Tromans thinks Hood is depicted in Dadd's peaceful, airy 'Portrait of a Young Man' (1853).

'Hood wanted him to be a success,' he says. 'He allowed journalists to come to see Dadd at work, he encouraged art shops to donate to him when his family stopped sending materials…' (Two of his siblings were also hospitalised with mental illness.) '… and when Dadd was working on his great painting of Oberon and Titania, "Contradiction" (1854-8), Hood had that memorialised by Henry Hering [see p42], the top portrait photographer of the day.' Dadd was prevented by law from profiting from his work, which was not allowed out of the hospital.

'Contradiction: Oberon and Titania', 1854-58, by Richard Dadd

PHOTO © DAVID PARMITER

But it was surely inappropriate that Hood, Haydon and other physicians close to Dadd personally owned a great many of his works, and their estates eventually swelled with the proceeds.

Dadd's case notes, written in a Victorian hand, explain that he was good company but suffered from bulimia and made impulsive aggressive attacks, for which he would later apologise. His sensation of passivity – he felt he was merely the 'cat's paw' working at the behest of spirits – is a known symptom of schizophrenia. So is the jumbled thinking in his rambling poem 'Feller's Master Stroke' (1865). And yet it does show acceptance:

> And they close their eyes, that gate –
> By which reminders enter.
> And in a paradise of fools contented live.

The notes exhibit a watch-and-wait approach. 'No change.' 'No change.' 'No change.' Food, rest and occasional opiates were the only remedies of the time. An essay in the exhibition's catalogue by Professor Richard Howard explains that while Dadd was spared the ineffectual therapies such as insulin coma or frontal leucotomy of the early 20th century, the breakthrough discovery in 1952 of chlorpromazine would have meant that if treated today 'it would be reasonable to anticipate that he would be out of hospital and living in unlocked supervised accommodation within five to ten years'.

Dadd became a prize-winning student at the Royal Academy, with the best record of attendance

In the Bethlem studio and gallery, I saw stunning work by artists who are current or former health-service users, such as Daniel Regan. These artists are supported and their work celebrated, and sold on their behalf. The long road to honouring their output probably started with Dadd.

Clearly, when he was in prison, Dadd's imaginative freedom replaced physical freedom, and the lack of time that was so acute during that fateful, rushed Grand Tour was replaced by acres, oodles, vast yards of uninterrupted time, with a single painting sometimes taking eight years to complete. His work is often beautiful, but the menace of weaponry and tortured thinking is horribly present. 'He's funny, he has a sense of wit, he undermines himself a lot,' says Tromans. 'It's why I've kept going with him.' Tromans feels Dadd lacked the ability to relate to another person. I closed by asking if he felt Dadd was remorseful, but I was unprepared for the stark answer: 'No.'

Richard Dadd: Beyond Bedlam *is at the Royal Academy of Arts from 25 July to 25 October.*

Theatre

Fringe benefits

Lloyd Evans

Here Comes J. Edgar! A Comedy Musical
King's Head Theatre, until 16 August

Firebird
Southwark Playhouse, until 1 August

Here Comes J. Edgar! has a brash poster featuring a cross-dressing FBI agent in fishnet tights with his thighs splayed aggressively towards the viewer. He points a warning finger as if to say, 'Enjoy this show or go to jail.'

The abrasive imagery aligns with the arrogant tone of most LGBTQ+ advertising but the show itself has a more humane and playful temper. Harry Shearer and Tom Leopold have written a superb tragicomedy about a powerful homosexual who wants to conceal his love life while hunting down America's most notorious criminals.

We first meet Hoover as he lies in a hospital bed flanked by two chain-smoking nurses who discuss his health while filling the room with tobacco fumes. This quietly amusing scene sets the mood. Hoover muscles his way to the top of the FBI and falls in love with a handsome junior, Clyde, whom he appoints as his lifelong assistant – effectively a marriage proposal.

It feels like a West End show miraculously transferred to an intimate fringe venue

His secretary walks in and finds the couple in a clinch which Hoover explains away as a martial-arts hold. Later, she tries to flirt with him and he responds by planting an experimental kiss on her lips. 'Oh, Mr Hoover,' she gasps with feigned surprise. 'What were you thinking of?' 'Honestly?' he tells her, 'Boy scouts.'

The show doesn't try to hold its subject to account for his many abuses of power. We see him blackmailing FDR, Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson by threatening to expose their secrets but the illicit deals are treated as harmless fun. His pursuit of the psychotic armed robber, John Dillinger, is played for comic-book laughs as well.

Bryan Batt presents Hoover as an adorable softie who likes ogling men's bodybuilding magazines while yearning for a quiet life of domestic bliss with the dependable Clyde. His penchant for wearing frocks barely features in the drama, which focuses on his inhibitions rather than on his ability to cast them aside.

The director, Josh Seymour, benefits from a lavish budget and a company of 16 actors plus a band of live musicians. The costumes are great and Jamie Platt's stage lighting is superb. It feels like a West End show miraculously transferred to an intimate fringe venue. If this is a try-out for New York, it deserves to go all the way because the script is terrific and the show's atmosphere is irresistibly warm and friendly. A new poster might reflect those virtues better.

A note of warning. Viewers under 30 are unlikely to understand all the references. The show is a paean to the United States at the zenith of its power in the second half of the 20th century. If you weren't there at the time, you may not appreciate it.

Firebird is a harrowing play about rape gangs written by Rochdale resident Phil Davies. The opening and closing sections are hard to understand but the central scenes expose the gruesome ordeal of a fictional schoolgirl, Tia. (Excellent work from the charismatic Mollie Milne.)

Tia is abducted at the age of 14 and raped by multiple Asian men whose leader, AJ, gives her a chilling warning: 'If you go to the cops you'll be banged up for whoring yourself out.' Nevertheless, Tia alerts a detective who promptly shares the information with AJ's gang. Revenge follows swiftly. 'I got my head kicked in,' says Tia. A female social worker hears of the police's dealings with AJ but she takes no action. 'I'm here to help you, Tia,' she says, but her decision to stay silent abets the rapists and prolongs Tia's ordeal. Later Tia is attacked again and ends up in a wheelchair.

The play premièred in 2015 and this overdue revival deserves all the publicity it can get. The rape-gang story has received very little attention from theatre-makers because it doesn't conform to their hierarchy of saints and devils. Drama producers like to believe that all minorities are model citizens, that all public-sector workers are community heroes, and that all rich white males are part of a plot to destroy the poor.

The grooming-gang scandal suggests otherwise. Rich white men such as Rupert Lowe and Elon Musk want to support the poor by exposing the cases. Public-sector workers are clueless fence-sitters whose reluctance to speak the truth appears to be supported by a semi-official cover-up. And hundreds of men are guilty of treating children as sex slaves and even ferrying them from city to city to take part in violent orgies.

So why do theatre producers make so little noise about this atrocity? The fact is that theatreland thrives on toadying and flattery. Preferment is won by those who tell powerful people whatever they want to hear. It's no place for rebels.

THE LISTENER

Conversations à Trois

Grade: B+

There's a special art in making something difficult appear effortless, and the string trio is a supreme test. It's the smallest viable unit for string chamber music: with one each of violin, viola and cello, there's no fat, no redundancy, and nowhere to hide for composer and performer alike. And yet its greatest masters – Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven (Schoenberg is a special case, as he usually is) – make it sound like a trifle, a recreation. They're on a tightrope, but they can't stop dancing.

It's a perfect medium, in other words, for a certain kind of Gallic genius, and I knew one of the pieces on this disc already – the skittering divertissement of a Trio by Jean Françaix, the last of the neoclassical wits, who died in 1997 after several decades of people expressing surprise that he was still alive at all. It's played with panache and a nice spritz of drollery by the young Berlin-based Boccherini Trio, and recorded with the pristine clarity for which BIS has become a byword.

I could take or leave Eugène Ysaÿe's big, single-movement trio, though for my money his sulky chromaticism is more palatable in trio form than in his famous solo violin sonatas. But it's always good to hear from Jean Cras, a Breton naval officer and pupil of Duparc. His shipmates called him 'Admiral Arpeggio' and he composed his only string trio in 1926 aboard the light cruiser Lamotte-Picquet. There's a Ravel-like grace about Cras at his best, coupled to a bracing, folksy melodic vigour that's unlike anything else in French music. And you won't hear him played better than this.

– Richard Bratby

A Useful Ghost is the best sex-with-a-vacuum-cleaner film I've seen in a while

Film
Phantom thread
Deborah Ross

A Useful Ghost
Mubi

A Useful Ghost is the best sex-with-a-vacuum-cleaner film I've seen in a while – or perhaps ever. It is deeply funny. How could it not be? But it's also, in its way, deadly serious. A first film from Ratchapoom Boonbunchachoke, its camp absurdism and high jinks with electric appliances are also a satire on Thailand's violent recent history. You can see why it won the Critics' Week prize at Cannes.

With most films you know what the film is, and where it's going, within the first few minutes: 'Oh, it's this film.' Here, you'll have no idea. We start with a character simply called Ladyboy (Wisarut Homhuan). He lives in an area of Bangkok where the local shops and other buildings are being torn down and replaced by a shopping mall. His apartment is beset by dust so he buys a vacuum cleaner which, overnight, coughs up (with a *human* coughing sound) the dust it has gathered.

A repairman, Krong (Wanlop Rungkumjad), is summoned. He is gorgeous and arrives with remarkable speed. It's not like the service you might get from, say, Currys. He offers a diagnosis: the vacuum cleaner is possessed. There's an appliance factory, he continues, where a worker died and ever since 'their appliances have been haunted by ghosts'. Krong's tale frames the narrative that takes us to the factory run by Madam Suman (Apasiri Nitibhon). She is aware that her products are haunted but is not too upset. Indeed, as a dehumidifier goes walkabout she asks only: 'Can we sell it?'

However, it quickly becomes more personal. Suman has a son, March (Wisarut Himmarat), whose pregnant wife, Nat, died from respiratory problems. 'You can't have construction without dust,' explains a politician over the radio. 'It's a necessary evil.' But now Nat is back – as a vacuum cleaner. In the warehouse she caresses March with her brush tool. March, who had been grieving deeply for his wife, is in ecstasy. Suman catches them at it and is not impressed. She whisks him to the doctor. 'I am less worried about his fever,' she tells the doctor, 'than I am that he made out with the vacuum cleaner.' (Every mother's worst worry, wouldn't you say?)

Even though there are no fancy special effects, the vacuum cleaner somehow has a personality

The cast have to deliver some very funny lines but it's kept nicely deadpan throughout. And even though there are no fancy special effects, the vacuum cleaner somehow has a personality. When March is admitted to hospital I felt quite sorry for Nat, who has to spend the night in the waiting room, hose drawn up to her knees – or what I would suppose to be her knees.

Behind the absurdity lies a sharp commentary on the citizens erased by the state, the 2010 Red Shirt protests, the environmental crisis and other issues the Thai government would wish to sweep away. Nat, who later appears in human form (played by Davika Hoorne), proves to be the 'useful ghost', as she's manipulated into colluding with the political elite. You don't need to have a detailed knowledge of Thailand's history to get it. You don't even need to get it at all. It also works as an exploration of love, grief and romance. There is such terrific chemistry between Krong and Ladyboy you'll be longing for them to get together but will they? Can they?

Its run time is just over two hours and it may be too sprawling but, on the whole, Boonbunchachoke is totally in command of the material and plays it, at all times, with absolute sincerity. It's only, alas, available on Mubi and if you've already taken advantage of their seven-day free trial you might wish to stump up for a subscription. You could do a lot worse.

Television

Ladies first

James Walton

Ride or Die
Amazon Prime Video

The Undeclared War
Channel 4

Ride or Die began with a typical day for a fiftysomething woman in a TV drama. Having assassinated a Russian oligarch in an Alpine mountain resort, Judith (Hannah Waddingham) skied away with Olympian speed, effortlessly evading capture by the many goons who pursued her, right until they crashed into trees. Back on solid ground, she went into a bar where she beat all the blokes in drinking games, before pulling a hunky young barman who was heartbroken the following morning when she made it clear that this was merely a one-night stand. Then, zooming home in a sporty Merc, she still found time to call her friend Debbie in London with the assurance that 'I'll be back for book club'.

But prior to the white wine and literary chat, Judith first had to contact the shadowy agency (is there any other kind?) she works for and receive some dismaying news. Sam, her apparently teenage line manager,

The current convention of shows about menopausal women is that basically there's nothing they can't do

passed on the director's disapproval of her rule-breaking ways and tried to pension her off with a Patek Philippe watch. Judith, of course, was having none of it. Understandably terrified of her, Sam agreed to give her a one-last-chance job: killing Billy Donovan, head of a London crime syndicate. Much to Judith's disgust, though, the agency's chosen weapon was poison. ('Poison's a coward's game,' she protested. 'Where's the showmanship?')

Meanwhile, Debbie (Octavia Spencer) had problems of her own. En route to a gala dinner, her high-flying MP husband, whose career she'd masterminded and whose speeches she'd written, announced he wanted a divorce. Debbie responded by hitting the aperitifs hard, unaware that by her seventh, she'd become a widow – or that, having shot her husband in an upstairs room, the killers were now coming after her.

Luckily, the gala was being hosted by Billy Donovan, which meant that Judith was on hand (looking a knockout in her evening dress, obviously) to get her friend out safely after comprehensively beating up all the armed men rash enough to try and stop her. But now came the tricky part: having to explain to Debbie that she wasn't a forensic accountant after all, but another of those hot female assassins you get these days (on television).

During the book club scene, Debbie described crime thrillers as 'painting by numbers'. At the time, this seemed something of a hostage to fortune, given *Ride or Die*'s own warm embrace of the current conventions of shows about menopausal women: basically, that there's nothing they can't do (in this case, even read without glasses) and that men are rubbish.

Here, however – at least judging from the first two episodes – the painting is done with such shamelessly garish brio that only the most committed of spoilsports would allow themselves to be distracted by such things as implausibility and ludicrousness; especially since the programme itself appears to be (mostly) in on the joke. There are also some fine gags, the stirring sight of Waddingham having the time of her life and, in a rare lurch into believability, the somehow convincing sense of real friendship between Judith and Debbie. Let's just hope – I fear unavailingly – that *Ride or Die* doesn't lead to yet more wildly inaccurate articles by middle-aged women about how underrepresented middle-aged women are on TV.

The Undeclared War follows another current television trend by being a direct sequel to a series broadcast four years ago. (No wonder it spent the opening scenes assiduously labelling every character who appeared and getting them to exchange information they already knew.) Otherwise – and despite all the high-tech computer stuff – this is essentially an old-school spy thriller where the baddies are the Russians and Chinese, and there's a mole at work among the Brits.

Simon Pegg plays Danny Patrick, head of operations at GCHQ and possibly the world's most worried man, who always seems on the brink of saying that he's picked the wrong week to quit smoking. Then again, he's got plenty to be worried about. Not just those dastardly foreigners and that even

Plodding

I am plodding around the pond
because exercise is good for me.
Even when it's pouring with rain
I am plodding around the pond.

Today, on a bench beside the pond,
there's a boy and girl sitting
on a bench in the rain neither talking
nor touching, together but not together.

Three times I plod around the pond –
exercise being good for me – and on
the third time when it is still raining
and the two are still sitting there
neither talking nor touching, together
but not together, my desperate heart
can bear it no longer. I stop and accost
them. *Can you not hold hands?* I ask.

Not a word does the girl say but her face
lights up like someone just coming alive
and she takes the boy's hand. Then I am
skipping – no, too rash – I am plodding
around the pond, exercise being good for me.

– Diana Hendry

more dastardly mole (‘One of our own!’ he cried wonderingly, in one of those cigarette-tempting moments); but also a government that clearly prizes a trade deal with China over the defence of the realm.

From my somewhat vague memories of the original series – written by the sainted Peter Kosminsky – this one, by Colin Teevan, is not just a sequel but a major reset: pacier, twistier and wisely opting to drop the central gimmick of giving computer science external metaphorical form (whereby, for example, the breaking of a firewall was represented by the breaking of a wall). Granted, Kosminsky’s version wasn’t without its qualities, but it wore its research so heavily that watching it sometimes felt a bit like doing homework. Teevan’s, while still well-informed, proves more unbuttoned, more gripping – and, in short, more fun.

Pop
Independents’ day
Michael Hann

Pulp
Royal Festival Hall

Wet Leg
Alexandra Palace Park

Everyone uses the word ‘indie’ to describe a style of music. And Pulp and Wet Leg are two bands that fit squarely into that rubric. But remember what the word originally meant. An abbreviation of independent, ‘indie’ was music recorded, manufactured and distributed outside the major label system. It began as an economic necessity: the only way the music that the majors were not interested in could reach a public. But it quickly became a belief system: DIY at all costs to avoid the corruption of filthy lucre. And

Cocker introduced songs via a PowerPoint presentation

eventually it came to mean a certain kind of music.

Pulp’s show was part of a weekend of events at the Southbank Centre celebrating the 50th anniversary of Rough Trade, the label that began as a record shop. It was among the earliest sellers of the self-pressed records that came out of punk, and soon became the independent label that was the artistic, if not business, model for everyone else: the label of the Raincoats and Scritti Politti and the Smiths, of the Strokes and the Libertines and Alabama Shakes. Its current roster has a string of critical and commercial successes: Amyl and the Sniffers, Sleaford Mods, Jockstrap, Lankum. And it’s still run by Geoff Travis and Jeannette Lee, who work with just a dozen or so people in an anonymous shopfront in west London.

Pulp’s reunion album, *More*, came out on Rough Trade last year, their first for the label, so they played it in its entirety at this show. Cocker said it was the first time they’d ever done a full-album show, and for superfans (for whom this was an intimate gig), it must have been a treat not to get the same set they’ve been touring. For non-superfans – which includes me – it was a little frustrating. Even the few songs added at the end didn’t survey the greatest hits, bar ‘Something Changed’ (it seemed telling that the dark and morbid ‘This Is Hardcore’ brought the crowd to their feet, rather than more upbeat newer numbers).

Cocker still looks almost exactly as he did when ‘Common People’ was a hit, just slightly dunner in choice of fabric, and slightly crinkled, as if he’d been vacuum-packed and pulled out a few hairs while unwrapping himself. He still dances the same – Ian Curtis meets Marcel Marceau – and he’s still funny. To break up *More*, he introduced songs via a PowerPoint presentation: showing photos and playing demos. The best bits were joyful. ‘Got To Have Love’ was perfect midlife disco, ‘Wickerman’ mysterious and spiralling, and a pitch-perfect cover of Abba’s ‘The Day Before You Came’ was the kind of treat you really want at these showpiece gigs.

Wet Leg, as momentous now in indie as Pulp were two generations ago, are signed to Domino, one of the labels Rough Trade inspired and made possible. Like Rough Trade, it develops big acts (Arctic Monkeys), releases incredible records that find solid audiences (Hot Chip, Richard Dawson) and puts out acts only their mothers could love. Like Pulp, Wet Leg are fronted by an unusual character, Rhian Teasdale: another arch lyricist with a penchant for innuendo, and a sense of self-presentation far removed from indie’s norms.

Since I last saw them a few years ago, when they were still very much an indie band, Wet Leg have become a real rock band. And better yet, in Teasdale they have a strange, sexy alien pop star for a singer – the Ziggy Stardust model. The group understand restraint: there were no fripperies from the rhythm section, just four-to-the-floor from the drummer and root notes from the bass player.

The live iterations of the songs were far harder than on record. The opening, ‘Catch These Fists’, lived up to its title, moving from skinny-tied new wave to something brutal. At an outdoor show, the muscle of their live sets strengthened their more delicate songs – songs such as ‘Davina McCall’ – even if it made Teasdale’s voice, a wispy thing, hard to decipher.

On one of those blistering evenings, Alexandra Palace Park proved the perfect venue. True, one still had to walk up the hill. But instead of being trapped in the ghastly shed that is Ally Pally itself, we were on the slope below with the stage at the bottom. Everyone had a clear sightline and some space, and behind the band the London skyline glittered.

Opera
Oscar winning
Richard Bratby

The Sound of Music
Grand Theatre, Leeds, until 1 August

La traviata
Buxton Opera House, until 25 July

If you’re interested in how words work with music, the collected lyrics of Stephen Sondheim are an investment you’ll never regret. But Sondheim isn’t infallible, and when he writes about his mentor Oscar Hammerstein II he’s often plain wrong. Sondheim mocks one particular lyric from *The Sound of Music*: ‘Like a lark that is learning to pray.’ ‘Wait a minute – a lark praying?’ he snarks. But the character who sings those words is a devout young Austrian woman with a head full of Schubert and folksongs. Hammerstein

The audience was one of the most enthusiastic (as well as one of the youngest) that I’ve seen in Leeds

is writing as Maria, not himself. It’s an art that Sondheim never quite mastered, which is why his characters – whether Swedish aristocrats or East End cannibals – all sound like New Yorkers in therapy.

Opera North’s new production of *The Sound of Music* takes the piece seriously. Clearly, they’re hoping to capitalise on the popularity of the 1965 film: they’d be insane not to, and there’s glitter on the souvenir programme. But the director Nikolai Foster pulls off a neat trick – keeping the movie fans happy while doing something faithful and fresh with the stage musical that’s been buried beneath all that Technicolor. This is Rodgers and Hammerstein’s swansong, after all; a homage to operetta, with a story rooted in bereavement and religious doubt. Its heroine sings of her ‘Favorite Things’ in a bittersweet minor key, and it ends with the death of a civilisation.

So Foster’s staging (first seen in Leicester last Christmas) takes place beneath a wintry-looking mountain, with bare trees etched against a sunset sky. It’s pure Caspar David Friedrich, especially when gothic arches descend to represent the Abbey. Out goes ‘I Have Confidence’ (which was written for

TRISTRAM KENTON

Pure Caspar David Friedrich: Opera North's production of The Sound of Music

the film, not the original show), though Foster is shrewd enough to keep 'Something Good', which shares the same provenance. Back comes a sassy, cynical duet for Max (Nicholas Butterfield) and the Baroness (Amy Freston), roles which have more room to breathe (and accordingly make a great deal more sense) than in the movie. And in comes the Opera North orchestra under Oliver Rundell, revelling in the tunes, but leaning into horn countermelodies and sighing string accompaniments.

Meanwhile the rococo staircase that signifies the von Trapps' home whirls on and off stage and the children, who have been superbly drilled, manage to make it all look disarmingly spontaneous. They're forces of nature; Maria (Katie Bird) clearly has her work cut out and one of the most enjoyable aspects of Bird's performance is that while her singing is as clear as a mountain brook, she can project doubt and even anger. It's a nice touch to have a Mother Abbess (Katherine Broderick) who doesn't seem much older than Maria, though I was less certain about Edward Bennett as Captain von Trapp. It's possible to play this role too stiff, and too straight.

But stripped of sentiment, Bennett's artless, understated 'Edelweiss' regains its catch-in-the-throat potential, and does much to offset the *Producers*-like vibe of the later scenes (always a risk with choreographed Nazis). Overall this is a *Sound of Music* with brains as well as heart, and the audience on the first night was one of the most enthusiastic (as well as one of the youngest) that I've seen in Leeds. Opera companies across Europe have long since incorporated the great postwar musicals into their repertoire, and it's good that we're catching up. Opera North deserves a big success with this show.

Adrian Kelly's lyrical conducting felt like a benediction on the whole tragic tale

Of course, Italian opera has to deal with its own share of preconceptions. *La traviata* has such a reputation as a weepie – and as a vehicle for the grander kind of soprano – that it comes as a jolt to realise that Marie Duplessis, the woman who inspired Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias* (and through it, Verdi's opera), was barely 23 when she died. If you're ever near Montmartre cemetery you should visit her grave. People still leave flowers and there's a faded portrait of Marie, looking piteously young and frail.

The best compliment I can pay to Alexandra Nowakowski – the Violetta in Buxton International Festival's new production of *La traviata* – is that her performance rang true. She looked girlish and she sounded more innocent than experienced. In the best way, that is; her sweet, focused voice was capable of great brilliance but also blended elegantly with her rather bullish Alfredo, Tigran Melkonyan.

Another *Traviata* stereotype is Germont père as bullying patriarch. But that, too, can play out very differently and André Heyboer sounded so mellow, and sang with such dignity, that you could practically feel the audience aligning behind him. With ingenious period sets by Elliott Squire, and unfussy direction by James Hurley, the result was an atmospheric, intimate-feeling drama. Practically a chamber piece, in fact, and Adrian Kelly's lyrical conducting felt like a benediction on the whole tragic tale.

NOTES ON...

Party bores

By *Steve Morris*

Some years ago, I managed to get an invitation to a very exclusive party. One of the guests was Prince Philip and some way into the evening he drifted over in my direction. He used the classic royal conversation opener: 'Hello, what's been keeping you busy?' 'I work in marketing,' I replied. 'Oh dear,' he said. He turned away and went to find someone more interesting. I was officially boring.

That's fine, because I have made it my lifetime's work to seek out the boring at parties. Those who drone on, those who tell the same story over and over, and those with that odd nasal monotone that makes most people desperate to escape their company. I am not alone in this. C.S. Lewis did the same thing.

In Oxford on 8 June 1941, at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Lewis preached one of his rare sermons. He urged his listeners to seek out the people others felt were dull. He argued that the bore in this life would be transformed into someone so wonderful, awesome and terrifying in the next that we'd better stop avoiding them now. Everyone is touched with the weight of glory and today's bore is tomorrow's celestial being.

This might sound far-fetched when you

are trapped listening to a tale you've heard too many times, but it is worth taking a moment to reflect. Behind Lewis's observation is a kind of hidden rage – how dare we judge others to be boring?

I actually achieve a true zen experience in seeking out the dull and taking the time to listen to them, often at length. After a few moments I can let my mind empty and just listen to the sound of the voice. It is a relief not to have to make conversation or try to be brilliant or witty. And frequently there are real gems in there, if you have the will to listen long enough and perhaps behind the words. There are personal insights, odd family tragedies and bits of information you didn't know you needed.

I had a friend who everyone else avoided. He was into buses, and we'd sit and drink tea as he ran through the best buses of all time, the best routes, the way they were manufactured. I realised that I was hearing a great story about British innovation and a life before motorways and Tesla cars and all the other rubbish that goes with modern life. What's more, my friend was the kindest man you'd ever meet. Yet he'd spent a lifetime having the kinds of moment I had with Prince Philip.

In Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which I snobbishly refused to read for many years, one of his rules is that we should become genuinely interested in whoever we are talking to. We should talk about what they are passionate about, not what interests us. He believes that when we do this, they in turn find us captivating. It's the basis for lifelong friendships and business success.

I commend a life of hunting out boring people at parties and beyond. Not because they are boring, but because they aren't. In fact, I'd go further than Lewis. It's actually the ostentatiously 'interesting' people who should be avoided at parties. Because behind all that 'interest' is probably just ego and a load of puff.

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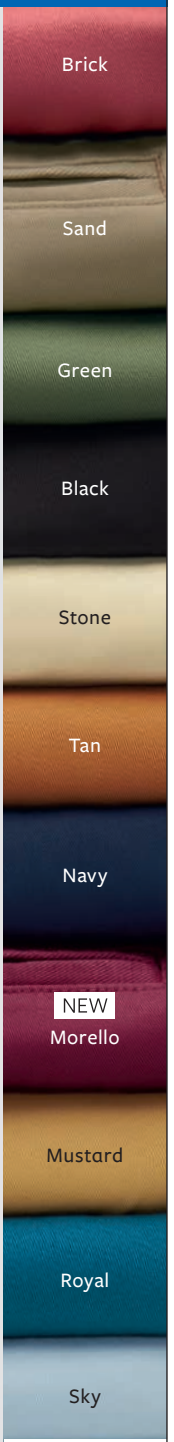

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As I'm sometimes reminded, and not only by Rachel Johnson, I have been promising to lose weight through many vintages.
Bruce Anderson, p59

LIFE

Best life
Rachel Johnson

My youngest son, Oliver, has asked me to make a speech at his wedding. I am very flattered even to be invited as, given the Beckham family meltdown over the Brooklyn nuptials, you can't take anything for granted these days. I've undertaken not to wear a slip dress of my own design, or dance 'on' Oliver to any of 'our songs', or speak for more than five minutes. I've worked out that this gives me up to 750 words to praise him and his lovely bride Lily; express what he means to me; convey my joy at his marriage to the incredible blonde bombshell who has been the apple of his eye since they first

Weddings are probably the only time it's acceptable to show pride as a parent

met at Manchester University; tell funny stories about his childhood and school days; and generally bring the house down without blubbing. For comparison, this column is 850 words.

The prospect of the happy occasion has also made me realise that weddings are probably the only time it's acceptable to show pride as a parent, since pride is still one of the seven deadly sins, despite social media where – as no less than Claudia Winkleman once told me – you have to try to remember that it's not a post, it's a *boast*.

I hope I'll be forgiven for saying something here as I won't be able to fit it all in on the big day. The story starts in 1990, on New Year's Day, when I met Oliver's father for the first time.

I was on a trip to Rio with my father, Stanley. As soon as we got to our hotel on the Copacabana, he picked up the landline between our single beds (we were on a budget), saying he was going to call a hack of his acquaintance from his time in Brussels. After he'd introduced himself, I heard him say this as I gazed out at the crashing surf and brown, oiled bodies in dental-floss bikinis: 'Well the thing is, Ivo, I'm here with my daughter Rachel. Yes… that one. Well, as you're both on the *FT*, my thought was, you two might as well meet, and were you by any chance free for lunch? Yes… today.'

It was an order. Even though he was on deadline for a big feature, the man who at that point I only knew by his byline agreed to sock us lunch.

We took a cab to Wagner, a Teutonic-themed place in the business district with black and white photographs of schlosses, the Eagle's Nest etc adorning the walls.

And so it was that my father introduced me to Ivo Dawnay, and Ivo introduced us to the house caipirinha made with mandarin juice, saying: 'One's not enough, two's too many, three's about right.'

After that it's a bit of a blur, but I do remember Ivo had a drunken argument with Stanley about the razing of the Amazon rainforest. By the end of lunch I knew I was doomed to marry him. It was not so much a lunch as a handover. And this is where Oliver comes back in, our third child ('three's about right').

Last year Oliver relocated to Rio and fell in love too. With the caipirinha. 'You can get them anywhere, on the beach, in the street,' he said. 'Made with guava, passion fruit, lime. When my friends came out, they all went mad for it as well and I thought, why isn't there an authentic, canned version made with Brazilian cachaca available?'

When they came back from Brazil he told us he was going to launch Caipi in a Can. 'How will you get fresh limes and crushed ice into a can?' I asked. Ivo negged too: 'If it's such a good idea, why hasn't Diageo done it?'

We both refused to invest a penny. We didn't want to encourage his entrepreneurial spirit. We wanted him to have a boring, steady job and be able to support a family. How wrong, short-sighted and stupid we were.

Back when Boris was in No. 10, we were in the rose garden one sunny post-pandemic lunchtime with his then chancellor. As we all goggled at the gleaming, gas-fired Sunak barbecue, Rishi asked one of my nephews what he was up to. He replied he was still a student but had a side hustle selling counterfeit branded sportswear. Rishi lit up with excitement. 'Amazing!' he said. 'At this stage I'll take anything!' He was desperate for people to get off benefits and start businesses.

It took Oliver ten months from conception to can. Trump's war with Iran 'screwed up shipping' and 'delayed the arrival of rum in port', but next month we are going to toast the bride and groom with his very own Caipi in a Can.

I might just end by saying how proud I am that my son is the first member of the family to have been kicked out of university *and* the first to have started his own company in his twenties.

Don't blame it on Rio – I think Rishi would be proud too.

Real life
Melissa Kite

The French couple did not speak much English so I rattled on in my best French, thinking I was doing a fine job.

She asked the usual question, how long had we lived in this lovely house? And I assumed she was assuming we were Irish and it had been in our family for generations.

Guests always like to think this and I don't like to completely disabuse them of it. They've come to West Cork for an authentic experience so I massage the Englishness out of the BB and me as best I can, on a customer service basis.

My usual shtick poured forth, therefore, in my best French. And my best French ought not to be too bad. I once lived in France, in a village near Orléans. I was 18 and had fled home at the first opportunity, as young people used to do in those days.

I was not able to take up a place at university, because I failed to get into my first choice. Ludicrously enough, I sat the Oxbridge exam from a desk in a school in Coventry thinking that maybe I would be

the one person from Coventry that year who they let into Oxford.

I sat in the drama studio and I wrote possibly the worst English lit critical theory essay ever produced, because my hand was stiff with nerves.

What no one told me was that having put down Oxford, Teddy Hall, where I then had a bad interview with a lady with hairy legs,

There then followed a diatribe in which she listed everything the English have ever done wrong

I ruined all my other choices. Irrespective of how much Hairy Legs didn't want me, which was a lot, I think, East Anglia and a few other top places then said: 'Naff off if you think we're taking Oxford's rejects.'

This was how it worked then. I didn't get into my second or third choice and, in those days, you threw your toys out of the pram if only Keele said yes to you.

So off I flounced to France, having consulted the *Lady*, which was then the bible of au pair jobs, while I put through another application for the following year to go to Royal Holloway – first choice, only choice. And it worked. They said yes.

I lived with a family in Combleux, where I was a very good nanny to their lovely baby but a very bad au pair in every other respect, because I was 18 and clueless. But I did perfect my French.

I still imagine I can speak it fluently. So I rattled on to the couple from Nîmes and they nodded, looked occasionally confused, but otherwise made polite noises.

This is what I thought I said to take the edge off our Englishness, for she was so enamoured with Ireland that she had been all the way to Kerry to buy a tin whistle, and was playing it in her room every day.

So this was my explanation of the BB and me, which I confess veered between French and English as I scoured the depths of my vocabulary: *Mon mari*, I said, was Italian on his mother's side, French and German on his father's side. *Moitié-Moitié.*

But his mother left his father when he was very young and his *seconde mère*, *deuxième mère sorry*, was *Irlandais*, from Donegal. He was brought up by an *Irlandais mère*.

I didn't say *in* Donegal. I did specify Balham and Brighton. Then I explained that I am half-Italian, on my mother's side. So a *vrai mixe*. We lived for years in London and now we are *en Irlande* because *mon mari* likes the idea of returning to his *deuxième mère's Irlandais* roots (and we want an EU passport, but I left that bit out).

A few nights later, it was the BB's birthday and we sat on the patio with a pavlova. The guests got out of their minivan, returning from their day trip, and I asked them to join us. We had a very merry time and the conversation in Franglais rattled on a treat, with the BB doing his ridiculous thing of speaking very slowly in bad English as if that makes him comprehensible to foreigners.

We touched on the subject of all the places they had travelled to and England reared its head. Her face turned to thunder and she shouted: '*Je déteste les Anglais*!' Her little grey husband, curled in his chair, shrank further and nodded balefully.

There then followed a diatribe in which she listed everything the English have ever done wrong including two world wars, where their actions were somehow bad even when they saved the French, and the famine in Ireland.

She shouted and shouted about how much she detested *les Anglais* until I started to get scared that she knew we were English and had deceived her, and she was about to take a dessert knife and slash us to bits – for Agincourt! And then I realised my years-old French had been churning out a load of cobblers.

They were so sure we were Irish born and bred that they wanted to charm us by denouncing the Brits. I looked at the BB and he looked at me. We sat in silence for a few moments, and then he shouted out: '*Putains*! Yes? Pigs! Eh! *Les gros* pig! Yes?' And he started making oinking noises.

'Roast beef!' I shouted, thinking let's get off the subject of pigs, for that might be a bit much. But it was fine. The French people were clapping for joy, then stuffing pavlova down their faces with renewed gusto.

Dolce Vita

Nicholas Farrell

Dante's Beach, Ravenna

I was at the wheel of the Land Rover Defender on the mile-long dirt track that leads to the main road from our house and I was still feeling existentially disturbed by our defeat at the hands of the awful Argies.

Dusk was falling and I just wanted to get into the village, buy a couple of litres of red and get back without running into a police roadblock. There are only four inhabited houses on our L-shaped dirt track, which at the other end peters out into the fields near the sea, and so there is rarely any traffic at all. But in front of me a small white car had stopped. A man's naked arm protruding from the passenger window waved me to a halt. I pulled up alongside, irritated…

Even my Italian wife, Carla, a hot-blooded Latino and devout Catholic, who supports whoever England are playing, especially if Catholic, had confessed that the Argies were 'cockroaches and sheep ticks' for the disgraceful way that they had cheated. But she also said: 'You *inglesi* are such *coglioni*' (testicles literally, assholes actually). And who could disagree?

But let me tell you why we lost. If a black cat crosses the road in front of your car round here, you need to stop until another car comes by and overtakes you, otherwise it will bring you bad luck. Well, during the match our very own black cat, Angelo, lay stretched out ominously on a cupboard right above the television with a front paw dangling down. In vain did I tell my three sons to get him the hell out of there. My three daughters were busy elsewhere, obviously. Fatally, early in the second half, Angelo then rolled over ostentatiously to face the wall. From that moment on, our fate was sealed.

The unclothed arm belonged to Gianni, our ancient but still fit-as-a-fiddle neighbour, a wifeless farmer who parades slowly up and down the dirt track past our gates in his

In her first year of freedom the wolf wandered, a bit like the poet Dante when he was banished from Florence

Suzuki Samurai – or else on his prize mule that he won in a game of poker – with his bright-red Wild West neckerchief and cowboy hat. I am sure it is his way of setting out his stall in readiness for when I kick the bucket and he can make a move on Carla, who is much younger than me, let alone him.

Today he was topless, but still had the neckerchief and the hat. Beside him in the driving seat was Valentina, a youngish unmarried woman who lives upstream from us towards Ravenna. She helps him with his donkeys. Her presence lifted my spirits.

'Look! Look! A wolf!' proclaimed Gianni. Indeed, there was a wolf bounding across the parched fields in the direction of our house behind us. 'They love eating donkeys,' wailed Valentina. This one might, I supposed, eat in a single sitting our own donkey Peppa, our nine chickens, our two dogs and our two cats who include the black one that lost us the World Cup.

Trying to make light of the situation, I bid farewell, saying, '*In bocca al lupo*' ('In the mouth of the wolf'), as they say in Italy for 'Good luck.' Valentina gave the standard reply: '*Crepi!*' ('Death to the wolf').

And so I pressed on in the opposite direction towards the wine. In the restaurant in the village where I sometimes buy wine on tap, I said to the girls: 'I've just seen a wolf.'

'A wolf!' they exclaimed. 'You must never turn your back,' said one. 'You must stand and face them. You must shout at them. A signore from Russi whose dog was eaten told me.'

'What should I shout? "Las Malvinas are British?!"' *Stupido inglese*. We all know there

are wolves out there. I hear them howling sometimes at night near the Martello tower. But this was the first time I've actually seen one. A few years ago, in winter, Carla saw one in the fields as she was driving the children to school.

The thing is there had been no wolves here at all since the 18th century until six years ago when a she-wolf pitched up in the pine forest behind the best bit of our beautiful beach, which has been stolen from us by highly trained nudists. This wolf had come from Camerino in the Apennines, 150 miles south of here. We know this because she was run over when six months old, brought back to life by vets, given a name – Ginevra – and in 2019 released with a radio collar. In her first year back in the wild she wandered hundreds of miles, a bit like Dante when he was banished from Florence before ending up here – or even me. Somewhere in her travels she'd found a mate and the rest is history. There are said to be about a dozen wolves now in our forest. They mostly eat fallow deer.

In the 1970s there were only about 100 wolves left in Italy, all in the high Apennines, but then in 1976 they got protected species status. There are now about 3,500. Many have come down from the mountains.

But you know what? I like the idea of these wolves among us. A she-wolf suckled the founders of Rome. I think the wolf is vital to the spirit of this place. And obviously I hope our wolves begin to find nudists more appetising than deer – and donkeys.

The Turf
Charlie Brooks

Yay! It's Glorious Goodwood next week. Which reminds me that the Richmond family were breeding and racing horses when George I was still struggling with his English. They founded Goodwood races in the early 19th century.

I, on the other hand, am directly descended from one of the many illegitimate sons of George II, so it's quite fitting that I became a carefree stable lad immediately after leaving 'school', while Charles Gordon-Lennox, 11th Duke of Richmond and Gordon, had to take his responsibilities rather more seriously when he left eight years before me.

Charles Richmond is now one of the most intriguing figures in British racing, the rarest of modern creatures, a man with enthusiasm and entrepreneurship coursing through his veins. The racecourse is but one string of his substantial bow; cars rather than horses

'We don't have the same algorithms any more.'

are his true love. But the style with which he runs Glorious Goodwood is second to none.

He suggested we meet in his Mayfair club at noon to 'put the racing world to rights' over a sharpener. Admittedly I didn't have my Sunday-best shoes on, but I didn't fancy the rather snooty scrutiny the doorman subjected me to. Could he smell my jitteriness? Did he know I'm banned from the club? Of which the less said the better; suffice to say the incident occurred on foreign soil.

I may have forgotten to inform the Duke of those shenanigans when we made our assignation, relying on him not telling the receptionist my name, which thankfully worked a treat. 'Broaks,' I muttered in the lobby, in a gravelly voice. 'Here to see the Duke.' She didn't suspect a thing. The club is the sort of place where minor public-school types in the bar try to ease their way into the deeper pockets of foreign gentlemen with entreaties like: 'We really must see more of each other.' I kept my head down.

I found the Duke in a private sitting room upstairs. He was in chipper form. 'Gin and tonic?' he suggested. But I could tell his heart wasn't in it. So I went for English breakfast with a sparkling water chaser.

Goodwood means many things to its incredibly diverse clientele. It caters for motoring enthusiasts (350,000 visitors a year), golfers, dog lovers (Goodwoof) and, of course, horse racing. The Duke has moulded 300 years' worth of ancestral passions, with extraordinary attention to detail, into an awesome, entrepreneurial empire. Behind his urbane charm is a man relentlessly focused on innovation and endeavour. 'I think globalisation is a huge opportunity,' he has said. And that vision has metamorphosed into a proposal presented last week by Goodwood and York racecourses that would revolutionise the structure of British horse racing.

The plan involves tearing up the current structures and power bases and creating an elite panel which commercialises the big flat meetings. It's not hard to envisage how things will change very quickly. The big flat courses will make appealing to the Hong Kong Jockey Club's World Pool their priority, rather than worrying about the balance of the domestic race programme. The rewards for courses that can get their races used for international co-mingling pool betting are substantial.

It's the equivalent of football creating the Premier League. The big courses will be able to package up their media rights and sell them either to sovereign wealth funds or private equity. And given that the Duke is a motor-racing man first and foremost, no doubt he will have had an eye on what has happened in Formula 1 since Liberty Media bought it.

In the past the Duke has been pretty blunt in his criticism of the structure of the British Horseracing Authority (BHA). 'The right to veto was a disaster – nothing got done,' was his view. Hence the current proposals to strip the Racecourse Association (RCA) of not only its ability to block change on the BHA board, but also its authority to strike commercial deals on behalf of the racecourses.

The Jockey Club racecourse group and Ascot had already put a gun to the RCA's head, as far as stripping them of any power and influence. Goodwood and York have decided to pull the trigger before the RCA came up with its own proposals for reform. But the Duke of Richmond has heard enough

The Duke is one of the most intriguing figures in racing, entrepreneurship coursing through his veins

talking: 'We need globalisation. The top end of the sport will get to fly, given the opportunity to thrive and grow, because if we're not in it, we're going to fall behind.'

Listening to the Duke makes one realise that he's a rebel at heart. He's posher than the Establishment and his family have been around for quite a bit longer than the Jockey Club. But being immaculate, charming and aristocratic doesn't mean that he doesn't have a fiercely independent streak and an instinct bred into him for survival, even if it means leaving a few sheep out for the wolves.

What his pragmatism shows is his confidence that they know how to get results at Goodwood. The World Pool is obviously strategically important to him. And a new sponsorship commitment from Visit Qatar underpins Goodwood's desire to be part of the global stage.

But his eyes really light up when he talks about his children's enthusiasm for the sport and the prospects of getting more young racing at Goodwood. 'I'm encouraged by how many young people want to come racing to have a fun, shared experience. We've got to encourage students that racing is a fun day out with their mates.'

At that point His Grace is reminded that it's time to tip me out. Luncheon is about to be served. Obviously, I'm nosy enough to wonder who he's eating it with, but they were tucked away in the bar, no doubt purloining a shooting invitation off 'an old mate'.

Chess

Discovered attacks

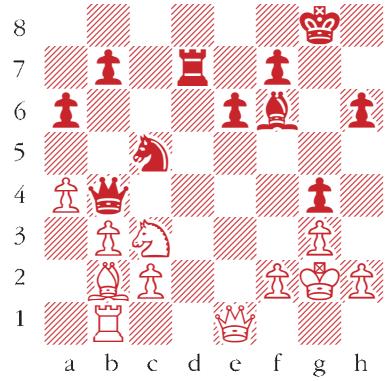
Luke McShane

Eleven-year-old Bodhana Sivanandan is one of the world's brightest talents in her age group. A recent jump in her international rating saw her secure the Fide Master title – an important milestone – and in April she became England's top-rated female player (of any age). She is beginning to collect scalps from grandmaster opposition, including the former women's world champion Mariya Muzychuk, whom she defeated in a classical game at the European Club Cup in October 2025.

Last week, she got off to a flying start at the Dole Open in Aix-en-Provence. Facing a strong French grandmaster in the first round, Sivanandan was under pressure, but turned the tables thanks to a sharp tactical eye. In the position below, her previous move 27 Bc1-b2 carries the threat of 28 Nc3-d5, whereupon 28…Qxe1 29 Nxf6+ wins. Marc'Andria Maurizzi could avoid that and maintain an edge with a move like 27…Bf6-g7, but the move he chose had a catastrophic drawback.

Bodhana Sivanandan-Marc'Andria Maurizzi
Dole Open, July 2026

Black to play, position after 27 Bc1-b2

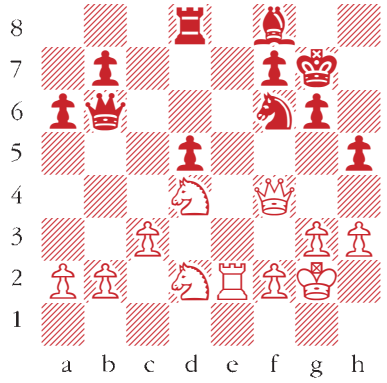


27... Qb6? 28 b4! The knight on c5 is trapped, and 28…Qc6+ 29 Kg1 Nxa4 30 Nxa4 Bxb2 31 Nxb2 does not help. Maurizzi's queen sacrifice is the best practical try. **Qxb4 29 Nd5! Qxb2 30 Rxb2 Bxb2 31 Nb6 Rc7 32 Qb4 Bg7 33 Qxg4 Nd7 34 Nc4 Nf6 35 Qe2 Nd5** 35…b5! was a better try. If Black could liquidate all the queenside pawns, the draw would be within reach. **36 Nd6 Rd7 37 Ne4 Nc3?** A careless error, where 37…Ne7 still offers some slim chances. **38 Nxc3 Bxc3 39 Qc4!** After 39…Bf6 40 Qc8+ Rd8 41 Qxb7 the passed c-pawn easily decides the game, so **Black resigns**

Maurizzi's problem was that his queen was pulled into the discovered attack with Nc3-d5. The game below, from the recent Naroditsky Memorial, makes for a neat comparison. After most plausible moves, the position would be balanced. Instead, the elite veteran Ivanchuk voluntarily courted danger by grabbing the pawn on b2. He must have seen the danger from the discovered attack (29 Nd2-e4) but miscalculated the consequences, allowing his younger opponent a beautiful finish.

Steven Zierk-Vasyl Ivanchuk
Naroditsky Memorial Rapid, July 2026

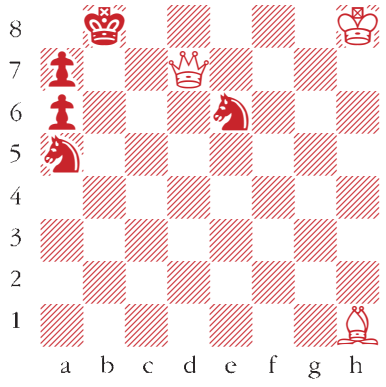
Black to play, position after 28 Qf3-f4



28...Qxb2? 29 Ne4! Qb6 30 Rb2! Qxb2 31 Ne6+! The decisive tactical shot. My guess is that Ivanchuk analysed only 31 Qxf6+ Kg8, whereupon 32 Qxd8 dxe4 or 32 Ng5 Rd7 both favour Black. **fxe6 32 Qxf6+ Kg8 33 Ng5** The knight sacrifice on e6 has fatally weakened the kingside, and mate cannot be stopped. **Rd7 34 Qxe6+ Kg7 35 Qxd7+ Kf6** Or 35…Kh6 36 h4 Bg7 37 Qf7 with Qf7-g8-h7# to follow. **36 Qf7+ Black resigns** as Qf7-f4 mate follows next move.

PUZZLE NO. 909

White to play and mate in two moves. Composed by Oldrich Duras, Shakhmatny Listok, 1924. Email answers (first move only) to **chess@spectator.co.uk** by Monday 27 July. There is a prize of a £20 John Lewis voucher for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.



Last week's solution 1…Rxd3+ 2 Kxd3 Rxc1 3 Rxc1 Nb1! and the a-pawn cannot be stopped.
Last week's winner Richard Hughes, London SW17

Competition

Feverish

Victoria Lane

Competition 3459 invited you to submit a passage that lavishly depicted a heatwave. The entries accumulated languorously, replete with detail – occasionally so excessive that one almost suspected the involvement of AI. Anyway it was enjoyable to wallow in these writings. Frank Upton, Sue Pickard, David Harris, J.C.H. Mounsey, John O'Byrne, Basil Ransome-Davies, D.A. Prince (and others besides) deserve honourable mentions, but the £25 vouchers go to those below.

A summer Lord of Misrule, Heatwave hath come into his estate, evicting cloud, curtailing rainfall, consigning long trouser, counterpane and necktie to laughable if temporary obsolescence. Feel his warmth unbuttoning your apparel, loosening your morals. For who wouldst not sooner recline in blissful torpor in His sun-bathed garden than toil at coaxing scorched provender therefrom? Heatwave abolisheth alike learning and labour, making ovens of offices, buckling railways and sending hay fever likewise to examinee and invigilator. A benign dictator, Heatwave's sole diktat is 'Holiday!' No beach stretches lonesome on his watch, for he calls forth ten million ladybirds to supplement such tens of thousands of us as he calls to assemble thereon. Time itself Heatwave slows for our better appreciation, days lasting weeks and weeks months as the sun itself extends the duration and intensity of its dominion. Make thy welcome rapturous as thou wilt, Heatwave shalt outstay it.
Adrian Fry

Heat everywhere. Sultry and indolent. Heat, shimmering above drowsy waves; heat in the chirp of cicadas, the languid splash of swimming pools. Heat pushing up thermometers, spraying hoses on children, humming with bees, dropping ice into glasses of Pimm's. Heat spinning fans, enhancing the shadiness of hats. Heat slipping on sunglasses, tasting lemon sorbet, tanning legs under shorts of linen and lace. Heat lying on the freshly mown grass and hovering over the snapping sails of yachts. Heat baking pebbles, luring people to fountains. Heat gazing across hazy horizons, sipping gin and tonics, firing up barbecues. Heat dining al fresco in cotton and sandals. Heat unfolding beach towels, dozing in golden fields, squeezing fresh oranges. Heat on the tennis court, heat on the country garden. In the very heart of the heat sits the god of summer, he who summons with divine music, the driver of the ice-cream van.
Janine Beacham

The townspeople really knew that this was a heat like none before when Maria Torres spontaneously combusted after mass. A widow for fifty years, she was as crumbly and desiccated as a little biscuit of the English kind, and burned brightly but very briefly. Father Coronel swept up the ashes to consign them, with the proper offices, to the river, but walls of heat and avenues of shadow made a maze of the streets, and by the time he reached the river, some days later, it was so dry that when he knelt on the river bed the parched plants cut through his vestments. After a week, the only movement was

that of the snakes of melting lead, from roofs and pipes, that slithered down walls and across streets, devouring strays as they went. And yet Macondo did not burn. It was too hot for any flame to breathe.
Nick Syrett

Today for a change the Huddersfield sky no longer exhibits its customary threat of drizzle. George's hand shields his eyes as he looks up into the cloudless expanse, towards the sun: clear, bright, blazing, disturbing. Any unwise enough to walk in the open will suffer for it; all seek the shade. June's rain had brought forth foliage in abundance, but the leaves now begin to weaken, show signs of exhaustion. Well-trodden grass is fading to brown.

Inside the house, the cold tap spouts tepid; his underwear chafes. All rooms are uncomfortable, but the cellar, with a fan whirring, is less so than the rest. George huddles there, resentfully, clutching a glass of elderflower cordial, still with the blessed coldness of the fridge upon it. He tries to read his J.G. Ballard novel, but falls asleep. In his dream, Ed Miliband tells him that this weather may persist until after Christmas.
George Simmers

Yeah, I remember Adlestrop. That damn place in the heat. The train, no warning, stuck there, midday, mid-July. A groan the length of the carriage. Sweat stinging the eyes, stifling air, no whirr of aircon. The Tannoy crackled, 'Your train attendant here. Apologies for the delay. Extreme heat has buckled the rails. The overhead wires are dangerous so the air conditioning has been switched off. I repeat, there is no air conditioning.' Silence as heads nodded. Sun beat through sealed and grimy windows. No birds flew over browned branches of scrubby shrubs draped with crisp packet, carrier bag. Against the shining sky a crane rattled and squealed, hovering above the local scrapyard. 'Passengers are advised that we are awaiting emergency services to assist passengers to alight here close to Adlestrop. Gloucestershire paramedics will be in attendance. Unfortunately, there is no bottled water. The buffet has run out of bottled water.'
Shirley Curran

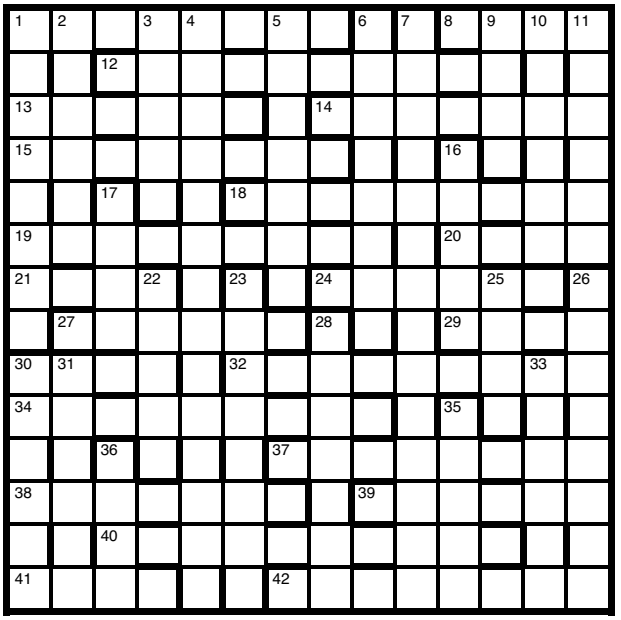
Visit the Leatherhead Riviera, hotter than Saint-Tropez! Parakeets galore, in vivid green tropical plumage; a white-tailed eagle on an awayday from the Isle of Wight, colourful Mandarin ducks and stately Egyptian geese. Paddle in the river Mole, drink the local wine and eat melt-on-the-plate local cheeses at pavement cafés. Buy delicious wasabi ice creams from Lidl, iced coffees from one of at least 15 air-conditioned coffee outlets, sunglasses from the Poundshop, vintage sunhats, shorts and bikinis from a huge range of charity shops. Dress to kill for next to nothing! Watch plumes of smoke curling upwards in balletic pirouettes from the wildfires on Box Hill, and the intricate patterns of vapour trails from Heathrow and Gatwick against cloudless blue skies. Access is a morceau de gâteau, via the M25 where you can witness the rippling mirage of its evocative heat shimmer on the tarmac. Let's celebrate the Leatherhead heatwave!
Elizabeth Kay

NO. 3462: SLAVE TO THE 'RITHM

You are invited to submit a short story in which the protagonist lets an algorithm take charge of their life or an aspect of it (150 words maximum). Please email entries to competition@spectator.co.uk by 5 August.

Crossword 2762: Keys of the Kingdom
by Chalicea

The unclued lights are a small fraction of almost 800.



Across

12 Oilmen rail about petroleum product (7,3)
13 Came across religious instruction chapter consisting of verses (6)
14 Bleat including angry tirade for this plant? (7)
15 Tea urns of Salvation Army medic, very apt resources, say, for starters (8)
19 Et voilà! He's poetry in motion (3,6)
20 Limit river level (4)
24 Father informally taking in socially acceptable northern islander (6)
27 Theatre alarms occasionally forbidden under Islamic law (6)
30 Endless source of irritation for god (4)
32 Medical specialist to bury benevolent creature with emotion at heart (9)
34 Skilled worker, salesperson, and aviator (9)
37 Tree feller's a civic dignitary (8)
38 Wee juvenile with scruffy sty (7)
39 Somewhat disdainful son, smelling awful (6)
40 Join end to end quantities of cloth, final items (10)

Down

1 Upset Punjabi has memory that includes form of address (8)
2 Cold period I endured initially in prison (3,3)
3 Female cut short outsize income payments (5)
4 Calvinist ruse I dismantled, tending towards doctrine of salvation for all (14)
5 Check incorporating originally missing bit of chair (7)
6 Be buoyed up around beginnings of abnormal tidal bore in this? (8)
7 Perkier ex-con we sorted out in training scheme (4,10)
9 Bone's dull snap after skinning (4)
10 Conductor's racket (6)
11 Incarnation of backsliding renegade, a vice-admiral (6)
16 Sudden attack, part of dramatic tussle (5)
17 Cooked many a bird (4)
25 A Chinese weight of a similar character (4)
26 Repeated expression of surprise about school's figure of speech (8)
28 Worried alto, GI with advanced ear problem (7)
30 Accepted beliefs, empty theories involving pity (6)
31 Bantu person, man with courage embodying energy and resistance (6)
35 Milton's monk's pan for cooking in oil (5)
36 Predict a star and constellation (4)

A first prize of a £30 John Lewis voucher and two runners-up prizes of £20 vouchers for the first correct solutions opened on 10 August. Please scan or photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number in the subject field) to **crosswords@spectator.co.uk**, or post to: Crossword 2762, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP.

Name .....

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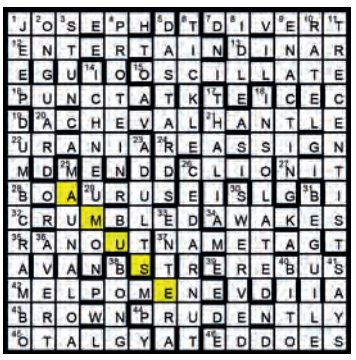
Email .....



SOLUTION TO 2759: MORNING EXERCISE

The theme word started in line 8 column 3. There were four definitions of AMUSE and four examples of A MUSE.

First prize Cathy Evans, Fordham, Essex
Runners-up Emma Corke, Abinger Hammer, Surrey
Peter Chapman, Como, Western Australia

Muffuletta

Everyone knows the story of the Earl of Sandwich: keen not to interrupt a late night card game at his club, he asked for roast beef to be sliced and put between two slices of bread, to allow him to eat it with his hands without stopping his game. And lo, the sandwich was born. But perhaps less familiar to us is that 140 years later, some 4,500 miles away from the Earl's cribbage game, another problem was being observed, and was solved in a strikingly similar way.

The turn of the 20th century saw an influx of Sicilian immigrants to New Orleans; almost 300,000 arrived in the city between the 1880s and 1920s, setting up shop (literally) in the French Quarter, in an area that became known as Little Palermo. They brought with them a whole host of Sicilian traditions, dishes and ingredients – including the muffuletta. Muffuletta (spellings vary) is a Sicilian bread, round and flat with a spongy crumb, and often topped with sesame seeds.

The key to this sandwich is bold generosity. Spoon on the olive salad until you start to question yourself

In 1906, Sicilian Salvatore Lupo opened Central Grocery in Little Palermo. He watched his fellow Sicilians shopping for traditional ingredients – meats, cheeses, relish, and the distinctive round, flat bread – and then trying to eat them and generally making a mess. He assembled the constituent parts inside the muffuletta bread, which quickly became the name of the sandwich as well. Central Grocery still stands today on Decatur Street, and still serves the muffuletta made to Salvatore's original recipe.

There are four integral elements to a muffuletta: the bread, cheese, meat and olive salad. There is variation, but all need to be present in some form to achieve a true muffuletta. Even the temperature of the sandwich varies. While it is traditionally served cold, Cochon Butcher, where I first tasted a muffuletta when on honeymoon in New Orleans a decade ago, serves its toasted, with the provolone cheese melting into the sandwich.

This is probably one of the most inauthentic recipes I've given, because it is highly doubtful you will find the eponymous bread unless you live in The Big Easy. The olive salad, too, is unlikely to show up on the supermarket shelf in Salford or Aberystwyth. And it's hit or miss whether you can easily find provolone cheese. But even when you plump for all of the substitutes, and thereby make the most technically inauthentic muffuletta possible, if you have the four constituent parts, the flavour and spirit will be true.

If you can't get provolone, you want a semi-firm cheese with a bite to it: gruyère or emmental work very well. A mixture of meats is ideal: I like salami and mortadella, but prosciutto or coppa or ham would all fit the bill. Whichever meats you choose, they should be thinly sliced, so that they can be layered in ripples. The bread itself may have given the sandwich its name, but there are good alternatives: I tend to use a standard cob loaf or a Ramazan pidesi, the puffy, seed-sprinkled Turkish flatbread. But ciabatta or focaccia will work – anything with a not-too-soft crumb and a not-too-crusty crust.

The olive salad, which gives the sandwich a unique flavour, is easy to make. Simply combine the component parts from existing pickles: mixed pickled veg (extra points if there's cauliflower here), black and green olives, pickled, spicy pepperoncini, and roasted red peppers, all roughly chopped, and mixed with a slosh of olive oil and red wine vinegar.

The key to this sandwich and its assembly is bold generosity. Spoon on the olive salad until you start to question yourself, do not be cowed by the amount of cut meat you place lovingly on top of that relish, nor by the slices of cheese that go on top of that.

You can eat your muffuletta as soon as it's assembled, and if you order one in a New Orleans deli, this is the most likely way it'll reach you. But I rather like Kenji Lopez-Alt's impulse-control version. He exhorts you to leave the sandwich for an hour after construction, to let the flavours mingle and absorb into the bread, and give everything a chance to relax a little. Isn't it always a good thing for everything to relax a little?

Join Olivia Potts for Truffles and Trattoria in Rome on 2-6 December 2026. For more details about this Spectator *Club trip, go to spectator.com/tastings*

Serves: 4
Hands-on time: 10 minutes (plus chilling)
Cooking time: no time at all

For the bread
– 1 round, flat loaf (ideally a muffuletta, but crusty cob loaf or Ramazan pidesi both work well here)
– 100g sliced salami
– 100g sliced mortadella or ham
– 60g sliced provolone cheese (or substitute with gruyère or emmental)

For the olive salad
– 200g mixed pickled vegetables
– 10 green and 10 black olives, stoned
– 1 whole roasted, marinated red pepper
– 2 pepperoncini – 1 tbsp olive oil
– 1 tbsp red wine vinegar

1. First make the olive salad. Roughly chop the mixed, pickled vegetables, both olives, and both types of pepper. Stir through the olive oil and the red wine vinegar, and leave to sit until needed. You can make this a couple of days in advance, cover and leave in the fridge; it will only improve.
2. Slice the bread horizontally and, if it's a thick cob loaf, scoop out some of the crumb to create a divot inside the bottom half. If your bread is quite flat, you needn't do this. Spread the bottom of the loaf generously with the olive relish.
3. Layer the first of your meats on top of the olive relish, folding it to create a ripple texture. Then place the sliced cheese on top of this, followed by the second sliced meat on top of the cheese. Replace the lid of the bread, and wrap the whole thing tightly in clingfilm. Leave to rest for one hour.
4. Remove the clingfilm, and slice the bread into quarters. Eat it straight away – or toast in a pan, if you'd prefer the cheese melted.

ELEANOR PLETTS

Drink
Good health!
Bruce Anderson

Rachel Johnson's raillery is reminiscent of Beatrice and Benedick, in the early phase, but with no danger of a predestinate scratched face. The Johnson family are not egalitarians. When it comes to morals, there is no equal distribution. But to be fair to Rachel, she has never tried to become prime minister.

That charming fellow William Sitwell would be a good Benedick. He is always worth reading, but it appears he has recently been unlucky with some customers in his restaurant. They insisted on sauvignon blanc to the exclusion of all other grapes. Yet, and especially in this weather, there's plenty of good sauvignon blanc, from the Loire, New Zealand – though one can have too much Cloudy Bay – and Bordeaux, where, alas, the best growers charge accordingly.

Apropos Bordeaux, I had a delightful tasting recently, though it required me to overcome a prejudice. I am always wary of very young wines, especially whites, which can give one an acidy tummy. I know: there'll be a spittoon, but I am not a natural spitter.

'I'd forgotten all about these and they may be undrinkable, even by that necrophiliac Anderson,' said our host

Anyway, we were drinking 2025 Barsacs and Sauternes. The owner merely wanted to be sure that they were on the right track, a proposition hailed with thunderous agreement. Thereafter, they were returning to his cellar for at least a decade. (We agreed that humans should try hard to rival bottles in longevity.) These wines were all delicious – and, as the heat faded and the evening lengthened, they were life-enhancing. We had a Rieussec, which was my favourite but only just; also a Coutet, a Doisy-Daëne and a Lafaurie-Peyraguey.

A further treat awaited. Our host disappeared cellar-ward and returned with two dusty bottles. 'I'd forgotten all about these and they may be undrinkable, even by that necrophiliac Anderson,' said he. Undrinkable? 1976 Rieussecs, they were both magnificent. We stretched for adjectives. Leonine was my choice. If you should have the sort of cellar where treasures hide away, hope to find a bottle of that.

Age and treasure: 20 years ago this month, the then Prince Charles opened the Jameel gallery in the V&A. It is one of the finest collections of Islamic art in the world. The Jameel family are not just benefactors in the arts, design, health and other endeavours. They are exemplars of Islamic civilisation. Looking at the objects, one has a sense of the glorious era when Islamic scholars brought classical learning to the West. In two decades when it has often seemed that anything which can go wrong has done, the Jameels are a triumphant exception. Long may they flourish.

Health: as I'm sometimes reminded, and not only by naughty minx Johnson, I have been promising to lose weight through many vintages. But there may be a solution. Two friends of mine, Jason and Justin Drummond, are public-spirited scientists. They are already involved in health care and also in social care, one of the country's most difficult problems, which is why no one wants to face it.

They have now made a breakthrough with an oral anti-fat pill, GLP-1. It has been widely and successfully used in the States and of course does not require an injection. Though I would never claim to have any grasp of science, those qualified to opine have done so favourably. I've made my contribution to knowledge by volunteering to be a guinea pig. Do I hear Rachel saying 'drop the guinea?' I shall report progress.

Another report: I have temerariously decided to launch a website, bruceanderson.org, which will not confine itself to politics. It, at least, will try to gain weight.

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. A few years ago friends from New Zealand came to stay with us for what they said would be the final time. To commemorate their many visits over the years they brought with them a quite large ceramic replica of our house which they had commissioned. It had been made to hang on a wall. It was so kind – but Mary, it was not a thing of beauty. Indeed the sight of it rather put us off our own house. Of course, we pretended to be thrilled but my husband got rid of it at a charity shop once they had left. Now they have been in touch to say they are doing 'one last trip'. They are bound to ask to see where we have hung it. Help please, Mary!
– Name and address withheld

A. You might say that a long-term member of staff who'd been with you for many years on and off (to account for why they'd never met her) retired last year to Portugal. When your husband handed her a wad of cash as a leaving present she rejected it, sobbing, saying that what she'd like more than anything was the ceramic house as a fitting memento for all the happy years spent working for you. You felt you simply couldn't refuse.

Q. We inherited a much loved chauffeur from my parents-in-law. Our problem is that he has found love rather late in life and cannot resist telling us all the ups and downs of the romance. We feel this compromises the safety of his driving as he turns round to give us the details. Moreover, we just want peace and quiet on long journeys – but how can we shut him up without hurting his feelings?
– C.H., Richmond, Yorkshire

A. Ask him to join you in your kitchen for a cup of tea before setting out. Say you're worried your car is so 'smart' that it's eavesdropping on you and that, no doubt like you, he will want to keep personal information personal. 'But quickly,' you can gush, 'tell us here, where we're not being spied on. We're longing to know the latest on your romance. We've got a good ten minutes before we leave.'

Q. I'm to be a bridesmaid at a wedding and have been asked to give a joint speech alongside another bridesmaid. We have each written our own parts of the speech and combined them. However, on stitching it all together, her contributions to the speech – although lovely – are much too long and waffling. Mary, how do I tell her that we need to chop quite large chunks of it out?
– E.P., London SW7

A. Persuade her that you should both rehearse your tributes in front of a neutral third party. Brief this person beforehand, secure in the knowledge that any advice will demand a punchier and less waffly oration.

Write to Dear Mary at dearmary@spectator.co.uk

No sacred cows

The dangers of policing misinformation

Toby Young

When Steve Reed, the now ex-communities secretary, unveiled his social cohesion 'action plan' earlier this year, he promised to publish an 'evidence review' on 'the impacts of misinformation'. Commissioned by the government's chief scientific adviser, it would focus on 'how to measure the problem, assess harms and counter and mitigate these harms'.

That report has now been published and the headline finding is that 'anti-LGBTQ+ narratives' – such as claiming that state schools and other public authorities have been captured by gender ideology, and questioning whether biological males should be allowed to compete in women's sports – are examples of misleading and false information that cause harm, alongside climate denial and deepfake images. The authors conclude that such misinformation, amplified by X's sinister algorithms, poses a 'systemic national risk' and a 'persistent threat to democratic governance, public trust, national security, and effective policy delivery'. In other words, if you claim that Imane Khelif, the gold medal-winning Olympic boxer, is a man, you are an anti-democratic extremist and should be silenced.

Claiming 7 October was a false flag operation is apparently not as harmful as saying trans women aren't women

The authors – six academics from the University of Sheffield and one from Edinburgh – argue that new 'statutory frameworks' are needed because 'a growing body of empirical research' provides 'robust causal evidence' that exposure to misinformation leads to 'increases in hate crimes', 'shifts in politically relevant beliefs' (i.e. wrongthink) and 'changes in public health compliance'.

They boast of synthesising the findings of 228 academic papers, but confess that 'not all full-text articles were reviewed in their entirety due to time constraints' – there were only seven of them, after all – so they had to rely on Claude and NotebookLM to produce summaries. In other words, they fed the papers into chatbots because they couldn't be bothered to read them. That's quite an admission, given that one of the conclusions of the report is that the information ecosystem has been corrupted by AI.

But fear not. These conscientious researchers invited 11 'experts' to review their findings. Who were these independent authorities? Three of them – Stephan Lewandowsky, Sander van der Linden and John Cook – are academics who share exactly the same alarmist views about misinformation as the authors and whose work they cite favourably throughout – while another was Clare Melford of the Global Disinformation Index (which issued a report urging advertisers to shun conservative publications).

Not surprisingly, none of these 'experts' raised the alarm about the report citing 'research' by the Center for Countering Digital Hate to substantiate its conclusion that voluntary self-regulation undertaken by social media platforms, such as X's 'community notes' feature, has failed. That's the activist lobby group co-founded by Morgan McSweeney, Keir Starmer's former chief of staff, which published a strategy paper in 2024 saying its no. 1 priority was to 'kill Musk's Twitter'. Is this really what Angela McLean, the government's chief scientific adviser, considers robust evidence?

In case you think accusations of political bias are unfair, consider the following. Despite the 136-page report claiming to address the dangers of misinformation to Britain's social cohesion, there is nary a mention of the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that have been in wide circulation since the slaughter of 1,200 Jews by Hamas on 7 October 2023. There are three references to 'gendered disinformation' and three to 'health-related false and misleading information', but only one to anti-Semitism. Claiming that the massacre in southern Israel was a false flag operation orchestrated by Mossad on the orders of Benjamin Netanyahu is apparently not as harmful as saying trans women aren't women.

Alex Burghart, the shadow chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, has condemned the report and accused Labour of planning to usher in an Orwellian thought police under the guise of combatting misinformation. I would love to dismiss that as hyperbole, but it's all too plausible. One of the recommendations of this censors' charter is that the government should fund a 'comprehensive, wide-ranging, and monthly updated database of false and misleading narratives spreading in the UK' – compiled, no doubt, by the authors themselves. A state-funded repository of wrongthink! Let's hope that Andy Burnham's degree in English literature will help him to see that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a work of fiction, not a how-to manual.

MICHAEL HEATH

"As you are about to go down to the village Super Mart, could you pick up a pint of milk?"

Sport

Legends and sore losers

Roger Alton

It keeps on happening, the passing of sporting titans. First Garfield Sobers and now Kevin Keegan, a couple of the best, who charmed everyone on and off the pitch. Enough has been said about Keegan, his skill as a footballer, his drive, his hard work, his easy kindness to his countless fans. Not forgetting his perm, his Brut and his permanent presence on TV. He wrote a column for the *Liverpool Echo* when I was a trainee there in the 1970s. KK – then the sporting superstar at Bill Shankly's Liverpool – would often come into the office to work on his piece with the sports editor, Vincent Kelly. He wasn't happy to let it be ghosted while he did something else. He cared. And to us young whippersnappers, gawping at our hero, he was always polite and funny.

Returning from three years at Hamburg, where he picked up the European Footballer of the Year not once but twice, he called Vin to say, 'I think I owe you a column.' (He had been paid for a piece he hadn't had time to write when he left for Germany.) Anyone who still doesn't quite understand why we all *love* KK should read Tony Quinn's beautiful little homage to him, *The Man Who Was King*. Sobers was the greatest cricketer of all – he could do anything better than anyone else. Sometimes not necessarily the right thing. I only managed to see him bat once, in 1973, at Lord's on the second day of the third Test against England, where he scored a magisterial 150 despite having spent the night on an Olympic-scale bender in London's clubs. What a player!

They were a horrible, savage bunch, the Argies, though they did play with an extraordinary will to win

Now sadly there's no proper Test cricket until England, currently without a coach or a captain, play Pakistan in a match which starts two days before the Premier League kicks off. Until then there's The Hundred, wall-to-wall silly cricket that will mainly serve to make Indian cricket even richer: Manchester Super Giants, MI London and SunRisers Leeds. I enjoy it, though, and I have a funny feeling that Sobers would have leapt at it, and certainly at the salaries it paid.

Anyone who felt a twinge of sympathy for Argentina's lachrymose manager Lionel Scaloni boohooing away at his post-final press conference should forget it. National football teams are created in the image of their managers, who should be held responsible for the way they play and behave. They were a horrible, savage bunch, the Argies, though they did play with an extraordinary will to win, which isn't necessarily something you could say about England. Maybe Argentina, who are loathed all over South America too, have decided that football is a means of asserting national identity, however crudely. Whereas for England, as for most countries in the world, it is a game.

One final thought: I do believe all those traditionalists who sneered at the sight of Brazilian legends Ronaldinho and Ronaldo (who has clearly let his gym membership lapse) driving Madonna in a *Mad Max*-style dune buggy into the stadium at half-time should get out more. It was fabulous: more please next time.

As Tadej Pogacar powers his way to a record-equalling fifth Tour de France win, spare a thought for these riders being woken up at some unearthly hour for random drugs testing. Pogacar was remarkably equable about being tested at 5 a.m., and his main rival Jonas Vingegaard, who crashed a few hours after his 2 a.m. test and was so severely injured he abandoned the Tour, generously said he wasn't sure the loss of sleep had anything to do with his accident. 'It's a bicycle race and crashes happen in bicycle races,' he said. He wasn't going to win but he was the only person who could have given Pogacar half a run for his money. Such a shame for the race to lose him.

Surely waking riders up is wrong. It puts them in danger in a high-speed sport – though there's a view that the riders are paying the price for their doped-up predecessors. The all-night testing is to eliminate microdosing – where the rider takes a small amount of EPO at 10 p.m. and it's out of their system by 6 a.m. But can you imagine it happening to an Olympic athlete?

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Hysteria theories

The McKinsey Institute says that health outcomes for women are less successful than those for men, and it has been argued that men should take a greater interest in the problem. We have names of about 50 female doctors from the ancient world, and one wonders what they made of the male theorists' views of their bodies.

Health in the ancient world was understood to depend upon the balance of the four 'humours' (liquids) inside the body: yellow bile (vomit), black bile (from the spleen and liver), phlegm and blood. Having no idea what the

purpose of menstruation was, doctors argued that women's soft and spongy bodies tended to corrupt their blood, which the body very sensibly expelled every month. But it was retained during pregnancy, because (as Aristotle thought) it provided the raw material for life. When male seed entered the womb, it acted, as he said, rather like rennet on milk: it coagulated it and turned it into the material from which the foetus was constructed, and into breast milk.

But what if a woman remained sexually abstinent? That could cause the womb to dry up, become restless and start hunting around in the body for moisture, interfering with other organs and often making the woman hysterical (ancient Greek *hustera*, 'womb'). The doctor Soranus thought it was best dealt with by treating the body with tender, loving care: hot baths, massages, and suitable exercises.

According to one ancient Greek doctor the result, without some form of treatment, could be very serious indeed: 'The woman rages, becomes murderous, wants to throttle herself and throw herself down a well, and loves death as some kind of good. I urge young women suffering from a condition of this kind to cohabit with men as soon as they can: for if they become pregnant, they recover.'

In 1682 Thomas Sydenham showed that this was a nervous disorder, connected with the brain not the womb, to which men could also be subject. — *Peter Jones*

Seen elsewhere

Staggeringly confused

Connor McCabe

As seen in the New Statesman

'A garlic naan for every curreh, and a sofa for every telleh,' says the new Prime Minister, concluding his first address in front of No. 10. That's it? He hasn't said very much at all. Ending homelessness, and a 'Ten Year Plan', the details of which will only be revealed later. I've got to file first thing tomorrow, and I can't spread this across 3,000 words. Time to make use of The System: my foolproof formula for an 'Ideas Essay' when I'm up against it.

Returning from Whitehall to the office, I hurry into a side room, which usually lies unused except as a place to store the mountain of Zadie Smith novels which we're very keen to read someday. There on a table are the three familiar boxes: one labelled 'Victorian statesmen', the second 'Twentieth-century novelists', the third 'Abstract concepts' – each filled with folded-up bits of paper. Right, here goes. I pick out a slip of paper from the first box. 'The Earl of Aberdeen.' I take one from the second. 'Kingsley Amis.' Right, and now for the third. 'Uncertainty.' I can work with this.

Firing up Wikiquote again, I decide to just pick the first thing that I see and let the words flow

My three topics chosen, I open my laptop and log on to Wikiquote, typing in 'Earl of Aberdeen'. I use the 'Control + F' function to search for particular words and phrases. I try 'Andy Burnham'. Zero results. How about 'Cybersecurity', 'State capacity', 'Bond vigilantes', 'Grey zone warfare', 'Shahed drones'? Balls, nothing on those either. Ditto for the Kingsley Amis search. Did either of these men even think about the big issues?

My mounting despair is interrupted when our intrepid social media editor Todd Digwell pops his head round the door: 'Connor, me and the online team are going axe-throwing at BrewDog after work, and then we're thinking of doing an escape room. You in, mate?'

'Sorry, mate. The, um, vibes sound, er, low-key immaculate – but I've got to bash out this bloody cover piece,' I reply. Todd gives me a friendly grimace as he closes the door, and I am left once again staring at an empty Word document.

It's now 3.45 p.m., squeaky-bum time. Think Connor, think. I get distracted and open X on my phone. The top post is an article from BBC news reporting that the manhunt for the *Daily Mail* journalist Guy Adams is now entering its fourth day. Adams had been going on a ramble through the Pennines when he had apparently tripped and fallen into a ravine. The only trace of him was a copy of *The Sound of Laughter* by Peter Kay found at the bottom of a valley.

Another victim of our 'Age of Chaos' (my coinage). There but for the grace of God go I. It dawns on me. I've just got to write from the heart. Firing up Wikiquote again, I decide to just pick the first thing that I see and let the words flow.

'For three or four miles the ground is covered with bodies of men and horses, many not dead. Wretches wounded unable to crawl, crying for water amidst heaps of putrefying bodies.' So the 4th Earl of Aberdeen recounted the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, which he witnessed firsthand, but it could just as well have been written about Europe's deteriorating security environment in Ukraine. Where are the Kingsley Amises, the new Angry Young Men, who can chronicle this Age of Uncertainty?'

Intro done. Then a couple of paragraphs on Burnham's inflection points, a few on AI and society, some on bond markets and rent controls and round it all off with my concluding thoughts on rearmament in the age of online harms.

Filed. Now we'll need some cover art for whatever this is. Could use the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Oh damn, we used that last week. And the week before.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Old boys' club

In 1969, *The Spectator*'s leading article appeared on the cover. The first of that year was headed 'The Old Boys' Club' and declared: 'The Commonwealth is an Old Boys' Club, whose members' only universal characteristic is the entitlement to wear the Old British Colonials' tie.'

Last week Nicola Sturgeon, responding to remarks by Sir David Davis in the Commons in which he accused her of lying, got her lawyers to issue a statement: 'This member of the "Old Boys Club" has been spreading conspiracy theories on behalf of the late Alex Salmond since 2021.' No apostrophe this time. Perhaps lawyers charge extra for those.

An old boys' club is different from a boys' club – or in the north, a lads' club. Andy Burnham was photographed two years ago outside Salford Lads Club (no apostrophe on the sign) because it featured on the gatefold of the Smiths' album *The Queen Is Dead*.

Last year we read about 'concerns that the "Boys Club", which critics claim surrounds Sir Keir, were targeting senior female ministers', as the *Mail on Sunday* put it. No apostrophe there either, but the point was that the club excluded girls.

For the socially exclusive nexus, we talk about the *old boy network*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as 'an unofficial or covert association between old boys or other old friends used for mutual assistance, especially favouritism'.

In the background is the separate American notion of a *good old boy* (first recorded in 1882). The *OED* defines this as 'a white male of the rural southern United States regarded as exemplifying traditional southern values; an easy-going man; a "man's man".'

I asked my husband what a man's man was. He didn't know, but said he hoped to become a *dear old boy*. The classic anecdote illustrating that tells of Millais painting Cardinal Newman's portrait in 1881, when Newman was 80. The painter pointed to a dais and said, 'Oh, Your Eminence, on that eminence, if you please.' When Newman hesitated, Millais exclaimed: 'Come, jump up, you dear old boy.' But Newman was a saint, which my husband is not.

— Dot Wordsworth

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